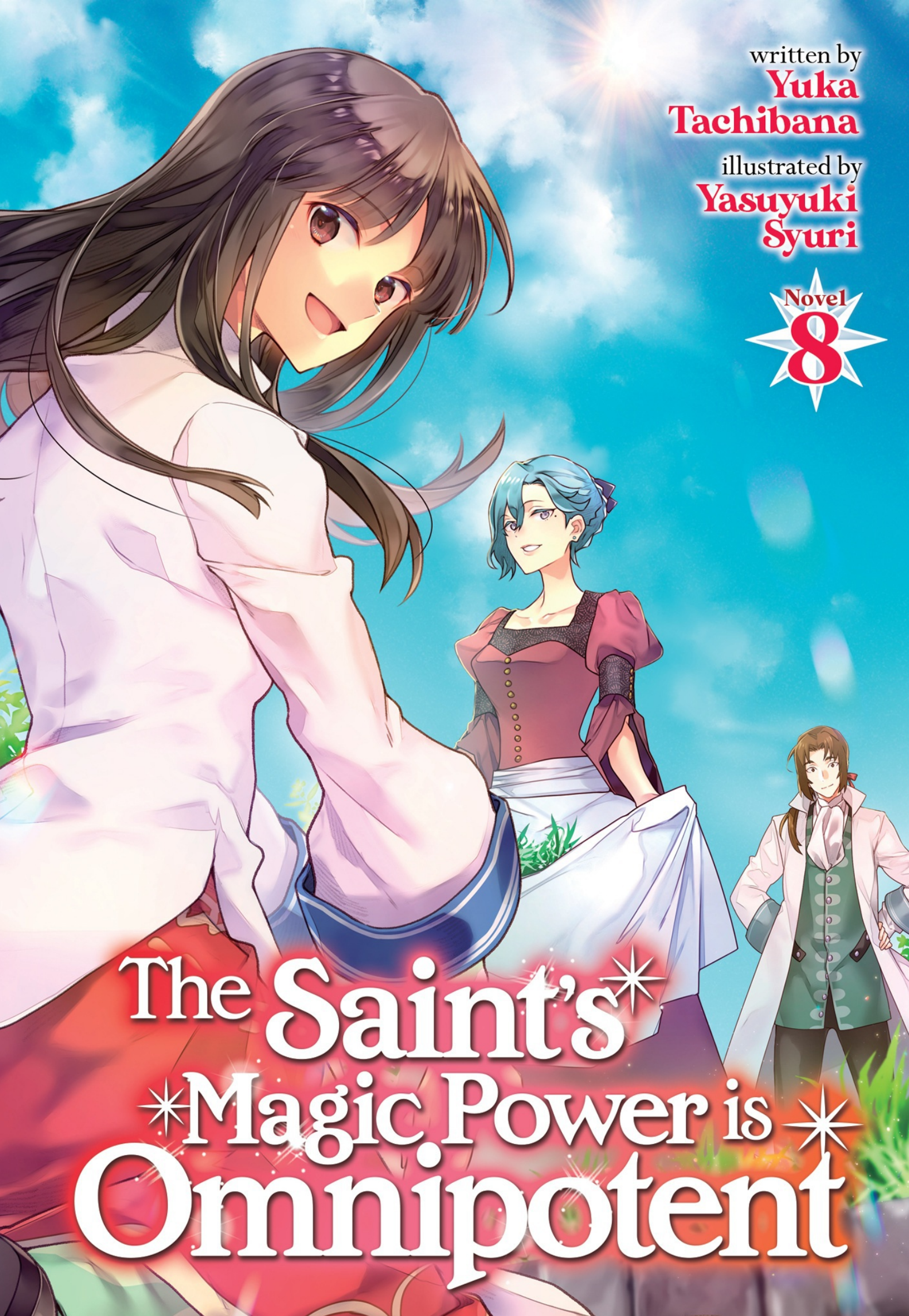




written by
**Yuka
Tachibana**

illustrated by
**Yasuyuki
Syuri**

Novel
8

The Saint's *Magic Power is* Omnipotent



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The Saint's *Magic Power is* Omnipotent

It was a dish of potatoes
drizzled with melted cheese.
I had known it as raclette
back in Japan, but I had
no idea it could be this
delicious! Was it because
different cheeses were used?
I continued shoveling bite
after bite into my mouth
as I marveled at
the scrumptiousness.

*A huge banquet to celebrate the successful
purge of the black swamps in Hawke's Domain!*





After Sei and Yuri went to the theater together, people began to gossip about their relationship. Although Johan could tell Sei had no romantic feelings for Yuri, he worried over how Albert was taking it and went to visit him...

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking that it's surprising that Sei went to the theater."

"I was surprised as well. I assumed she didn't care for such aristocratic venues."

"Me too. If I had known she might be interested, I would have invited her."

"What? You wanted to be the first to take her to a play?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

Albert remained unperturbed by the teasing and glared defiantly, which made Johan burst out laughing.

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The Saint's *Magic Power is* Omnipotent



WRITTEN BY
Yuka Tachibana

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasuyuki Syuri



Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters

*The Saint's Magic Power
is Omnipotent*

Sei



Sei

Sei Takanashi, an office lady who was summoned to another world to be the Saint. She's been healing people and purging monsters, and recently has been troubled by the fact that all over the place, people have begun to worship her. Enjoys cooking and making cosmetics.



Johan Valdec

The head researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. Keeps an eye on and takes care of Sei. Friends with Albert since childhood.



Yuri Drewes

Grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly. His only interest is in research related to magic and magical powers. Has taken a keen interest in Sei.



Jude

A researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora and in charge of teaching Sei. Caring and friendly. Frequently comes to snatch the food Sei makes.



Aira

Aira Misono, a high schooler who was summoned to another world like Sei. Studying magic at the Royal Magi Assembly.



Elizabeth Ashley

The daughter of a marquis whom Sei befriended at the library. Looks up to Sei.



Erhart Hawke

Magus of the Royal Magi Assembly and Albert's older brother. A man of few words who has common sense. Always being manipulated by Yuri.



Leonhardt

The leader of the mercenary company in Klausner's Domain. He takes a liking to Sei for her great skill as an alchemist.



Albert Hawke

Knight commander of the Knights of the Third Order. Known as the "Ice Knight" for his supposedly frigid demeanor, but toward Sei, he's...?



The moment she got home from working overtime at the office, Sei Takanashi, an office lady in her twenties, was abruptly summoned to another world. Although Sei was summoned to be the Saint, the crown prince of the kingdom exited the room with only Aira Misono, the cute high school girl who had been summoned with Sei, leaving Sei behind.

Sei had no notion of how to return to Japan, so she soon decided to begin working at the palace's Research Institute of Medicinal Flora.

Although Sei realized that she was indeed the Saint, she concealed the truth in order to live her life as an ordinary person. However, Sei displayed tremendous magical ability, astounding everyone with her skills in potion-making, cooking, and concocting cosmetics.

Starting from the day she used one of her high-grade HP potions to save Knight Commander Albert Hawke's life, Sei performed one miracle after another. In time, rumor in the palace began to suggest that Sei Takanashi was the true Saint.





Although she was summoned by the Royal Magi Assembly to be the Saint, Sei managed to avoid being outed for some time. She took up intensive magical training under the guidance of Grand Magus Yuri Drewes, and her days were busy yet fulfilling.

Perhaps as a result of her training, or perhaps by mere coincidence, Sei performed another miracle with her gold-colored magic, strengthening suspicions that she was the Saint. However, Crown Prince Kyle denounced those suspicions, stubbornly upholding Aira as the true Saint.

Nonetheless, on a monster-slaying expedition, Sei once and for all proved her Sainthood. When Knight Commander Albert Hawke was in danger, Sei called on her golden magic to instantly cleanse the black miasma producing the monsters.

As a result, Crown Prince Kyle was confined to his quarters for accusing Sei of being a false Saint. Furthermore, Aira, who had been isolated by Kyle once she arrived in the kingdom, was finally able to make friends at the academy, and with Sei. She, too, now strives for a peaceful life.





Due to the miraculous power of her golden magic, Sei was finally recognized as the true Saint. However, she still couldn't figure out how exactly to consistently call on her Saintly power.

Even so, Sei received a request to visit Klausner's Domain—the alchemist's holy land. She enjoyed the trip at first, where she became the apprentice of a master alchemist, befriended the captain of a mercenary company, and explored the possibilities of medicinal cooking.

Then, while working with her new teacher, Sei came across the memoirs of a previous Saint. Thanks to a hint in the memoirs, Sei finally figured out how to use the Saint's special powers—but the key to calling on them was so embarrassing that she couldn't tell anyone. She had to think about Knight Commander Hawke!

However, now that Sei could use the Saint's power, she could do what she had come to do: go into the forest with the knights and mercenaries, and slay the monsters within.





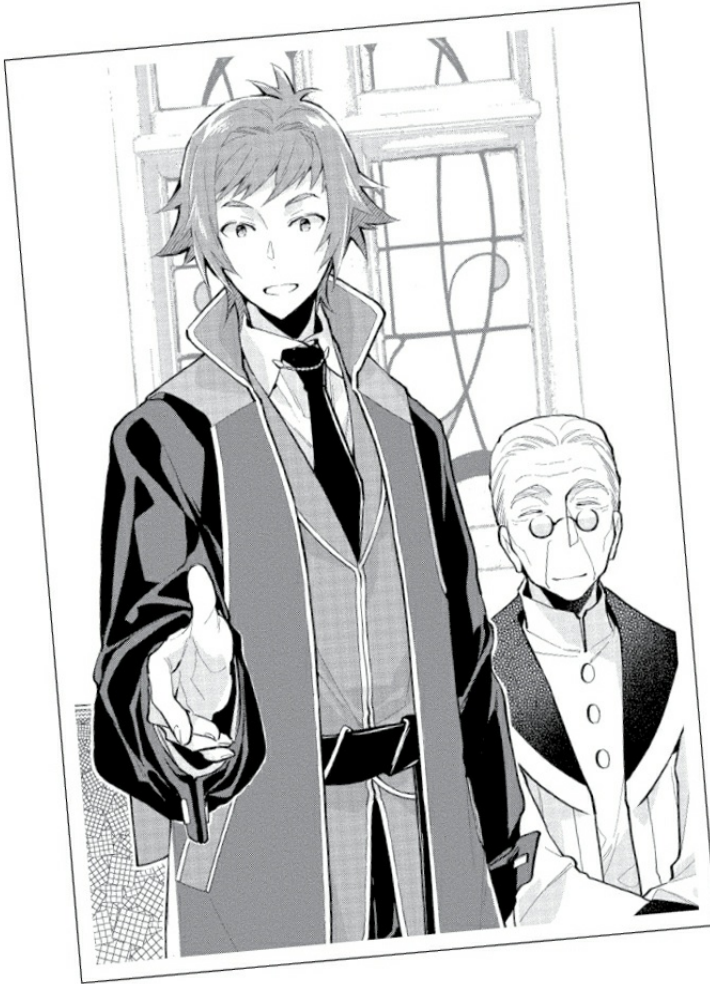
With the help of these powerful reinforcements, Sei successfully purified the forest and brought peace to Klausner's Domain. However, one thing still troubled Sei: the tragic state of the forest devastated by the slimes. In secret, Sei used the power of the Saint to miraculously revive the forest.

During the victory banquet, Sei and Aira helped with the cooking and grew closer with the mercenaries. However, with her Saintly mission now completed, it was time to leave. Though it pained Sei and company to say farewell to their new companions, they couldn't help feeling cheerful as they made their way back to the capital.

Now able to use the Saint's power at will, Sei headed into the forests of Klausner's Domain, where valuable herbs grew in abundance. Though she was protected by the knights and mercenaries, as they proceeded into the forest depths, they encountered slimes—monsters resistant to physical attacks!

They were soon surrounded. After a grueling fight, Sei and her companions managed to escape back to the castle. There, they discussed how to reach the forest's heart, as they lacked the magical firepower to defeat the slimes. Luckily, Grand Magus Yuri Drewes arrived, Aira in tow.





Sei returned to the capital from Klausner's Domain. In gratitude for her work there, she received rare herbs and seeds, which she used to develop new types of skin-care products. The recipes for Sei's products were incredibly popular across the kingdom, and they flew off the shelves the second they were put on the market. At her friends' suggestion, Sei finally decided to establish her own company. She opened a shop in the capital, run by Oscar and Franz. One day, when she was visiting it, she discovered that coffee existed in her new world!

Interested in what other imported products might be available, Sei started searching for Japanese food. She went to a port city known for trade, hoping that she might find something there. Before her search could begin, she ran across someone in need. The captain of a ship was searching for a mage to heal his injured crewmate. Sei helped him by giving him a potion that she had made, and she hit the jackpot: the foods this crew had brought from their country! Sei was delighted to finally be reunited with rice and miso, which she had sorely missed.





Sei was especially careful to avoid the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora whenever the prince visited it, but on one unlucky day, he accidentally happened upon her.

Through Sei's conversations with the prince, she learned that he was searching for a medicine that would aid his ailing mother. Using her knowledge from her life in Japan, Sei managed to successfully create a panacea: a potion capable of curing every kind of status effect. The panacea was given to the prince, though the kingdom kept the identity of its maker secret.

An exchange student from abroad came to the palace. Upon hearing that the student was a prince from Zaidera, Sei started to panic, thinking that his arrival might have something to do with the Zaideran ship captain she recently helped in the port city of Morgenhaven.

Although Sei had done this in the name of helping someone, she had given the captain one of her special high-grade potions, which weren't available for sale to the general public. She feared that this good deed had come back to haunt her. However, the Zaideran prince's objective wasn't the Saint at all. Rather, he hoped to learn about the Kingdom of Salutania.





One invitation was for a tea party to be held at the house of Sei's friend Liz, which Sei gladly accepted. There, Sei heard about the food products that each region of the kingdom was known for, and she came up with an idea. She would host a food festival where she would introduce these products to the nobility. With the help of the palace and the second prince, Prince Rayne, the food festival was a huge success. However, it only encouraged people to send Sei even more invitations.

Aside from the ongoing deluge of invitations, Sei was on the verge of welcoming the end of her miasma-purifying trips around the country. The general situation had greatly improved, and Sei headed to the location where it was believed she would find the final black swamps: the borderlands known as Hawke's Domain. Sei, Albert, and Yuri responded to the domain's request for help and traveled there together. In the end, Sei purged two black swamps.



SEIJO NO MARYOKU WA BANNO DESU VOL. 8

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TRANSLATION: Julie Goniwich
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Dayna Abel
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Mercedes Clewis
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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Act 1:

Dried Sausage

A RARE REQUEST from Hawke's Domain had arrived at the palace, entreating them to dispatch a knightly order. We had gone as requested and managed to take care of the monsters.

Hawke's Domain employed more soldiers than other territories, and the sheer fact that they had submitted a request indicated the gravity of the situation. Indeed, things had been dire—we had found *two* black swamps. Both had been located within a mine, and the second was waiting at the end of an old, abandoned tunnel. It therefore made sense that it hadn't been discovered earlier.

I only managed to stumble across it by accident too—an accident I had been quite fortunate to have.

At the second swamp, we even encountered an undead dragon. It was likely because of that beast that we ran into all those undead monsters in the mine. I was pretty sure of this hypothesis as well, because it wasn't until I purged the dragon, along with the second swamp, that we stopped encountering undead creatures.

Once both swamps were taken care of, we returned to the mining settlement. Rather than go back to the capital of the domain right away, we stayed for another handful of days to ensure that fewer monsters were spawning.

The knights and mages monitored the situation while I was left behind in the settlement. Instead of just sitting around, I occupied myself by harvesting some of the plants that grew nearby. Although I was the Saint, my primary occupation was that of a researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, and plant collecting was an important part of that job.

Knight Commander Albert Hawke accompanied me as my guard. At first I felt awful about having him come along with me, but those feelings gradually lessened. He seemed all too happy to chat while he kept an eye on our

surroundings. To be honest, I really enjoyed working while talking with him about herbs and Hawke's Domain.

What about Grand Magus Yuri Drewes, you ask? He was out monster hunting, as per usual—ah, I mean, he was out surveying the area with the others. Whenever they came back, the difference between him and the rest of the party was like night and day. Where everyone else looked exhausted, Yuri was invariably in high spirits. He even seemed to be getting more youthful and vibrant by the day.

In the end, the people who had gone out to confirm that everything was all right gave the mine their stamp of approval, and we headed back to the capital.

When we reached the capital of Hawke's Domain, Lord and Lady Hawke received us at their manor alongside their army of servants.

"Welcome home."

The lord and lady looked expectantly at me, so I replied with a simple greeting as the group representative: "We're glad to return."

The lord and lady were well pleased, likely because they had learned that the black swamps were taken care of. Their happiness made a natural smile spread across my lips as well.

"You must be exhausted after all that travel. We have prepared your chambers, so please do get some rest," Lady Hawke said.

"Thank you."

"To be honest, we have also arranged a banquet for tonight. I hope you'll look forward to it."

At the mention of a banquet, I thought back to a prior dinner party we had once attended.

Will the maids who'll be helping me prepare also recommend a dress for me to wear? I used a bit of Healing Magic to reduce the pain in my lower back on our journey here, so it's not too bad at the moment, but I am feeling a bit tired, and I think I'd rather wear a robe again tonight. Robes are way, way comfier.

As I was thinking to myself, Albert said, “Will the banquet be the sort we usually throw?”

His mother nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

What’s that supposed to mean? I looked at Albert curiously.

He noticed my gaze and explained that whenever the Hawke soldiers returned from a large-scale expedition, the lord and lady held a banquet at their estate. It was a no-holds-barred party meant to reward the soldiers. Everyone who had gone on the expedition could join in, regardless of their social status.

During the banquet, they served wild game that had been hunted in the domain, as well as cheese dishes for which Hawke’s Domain was famous. Furthermore, they planned to serve meals that the nobility didn’t usually indulge in—unlike the sort we had been served at the previous dinner party. Instead, there would be a wide range of simpler dishes, the sort considered commoner fare.

Will that also include cheese fondue and raclette, like Lady Hawke mentioned last time? If so, I want to join!

My anticipation must have shown on my face. Albert chuckled before encouraging us to hurry inside the manor.

I glanced at his parents; they were watching us with smiles on their faces. I felt a bit self-conscious about my behavior, and a faint heat bloomed in my cheeks.

Ugh, I’m sorry I love food so much! I apologized in my mind as I looked away and allowed myself to be led inside.

The banquet began after sunset, when it was completely dark outside. It was held in the main hall of the building where the soldiers employed by Hawke’s Domain lived, which was an old, chunky structure built from stones of different sizes that had been intricately fit together. The interior looked the same as the exterior, since there was no insulation on the walls. It gave off a real “salt of the earth” kind of feeling. Tapestries decorated the walls and provided pops of color.

The banquet opened with a toast from Lord Hawke. After that, it was the no-holds-barred party they'd promised. Lord and Lady Hawke even joined the knights in their carousing. Of course, Albert, Yuri, and I did as well. I had heard they would all cut loose, but I hadn't expected they'd really go that far. I was super grateful that we could drop formalities and enjoy the meal.

"Mmm! This is great!" I burst out with delight.

"Delicious!" said a nearby knight at the same time.

We exchanged looks and grinned at each other.

The dish eliciting our exultations was potatoes drizzled with melted cheese. I had known it as raclette back in Japan. I'd had no idea it could be this delicious. Was it because of the cheese they'd used? I shoveled bite after bite into my mouth as I marveled at the scrumptiousness.

"This certainly goes well with wine."

"It really does."

Meanwhile, Yuri was taking one sip of wine after another. His cheeks were faintly flushed as he smiled, making him look sublimely coquettish. His face was ever the deadly weapon.

Nevertheless, I agreed with him. I didn't think it was a good idea to drink too much, but I couldn't stop from helping myself to another glass of wine.

Albert smiled softly at us. "I'm glad you're enjoying the food as much as you are."

"I recommend you try these as well," came a voice from behind us.

We all turned to watch a fit maid plop a large platter on the table. The food on the platter had been neatly arranged and everyone let out a joyful, drunken, "Ooooooh!"

My eyes were transfixed on the platter. "Is that...?"

"These are dried sausages that we make locally," the maid explained.

It was salami. *Salami!* The sausages looked exactly as you would expect the quintessential salami to look: cut into thin round slices and wholly red with

dazzling white dots of fat. *Salami!* I was overcome with emotion as I, once again, laid eyes on this food.



“Please give them a try,” the maid urged.

I enthusiastically reached for a slice. “Don’t mind if I do!”

Even up close on the small dish, the dried sausages looked just like salami. I smiled with delight as I stuffed a piece into my mouth and was hit with that same familiar taste. It was so good. So, so good.

The succulence was divine, and it was superbly accented with salt. I couldn’t help but let out a squeal as the unbelievable flavor filled my mouth.

Oh, but the more I savor it, the more I realize that it might actually be meatier than I remember. Is there a different proportion of meat to fat? I wondered as I chewed.

“I take it you like it, then,” Albert said.

“Huh? Y-yeah! This is simply delectable!” I was slow to reply because I was so absorbed in the experience, so I wound up shouting in my rush to say something. Color me embarrassed.

Albert’s smile deepened.

Please don’t smile at that! I thought.

“We’ll be staying here for a bit, so I’ll tell them to serve these again later.”

“Thank you.”

“Um, excuse me,” the maid who had served the sausages shyly interrupted.

We turned our attention to her to discover that she had an even more wonderful idea to suggest: The artisan who made these sausages actually had a food stall in the local market. They also sold more kinds of sausages than what was being served tonight, so she suggested that we stop by and see what they had available, if we were interested.

“Would you like to go, Sei?” Albert asked.

“Can we?”

“We have the day off tomorrow. We can’t let you go on your own, but it should be fine so long as we’re together.”

Together. Meaning that Albert would accompany me? Due to my social position, it made sense that I wasn't allowed to wander the city by myself, but was it really okay to ask *Albert* of all people to go with me? We had only just returned.

While I felt bad about the imposition, I was incredibly curious to see the Hawke capital's market. In the end, I lost to my desires, though I asked Albert over and over if he was really, truly all right going with me instead of taking a day to rest. He was firm in his insistence that he wouldn't mind at all.

In that case, I was all too happy to take him up on his offer to escort me.

Thus, Albert and I made plans to go to the market the following day.

We set out early the next morning. Our company included me, Albert, and our guards. I didn't want to make a big spectacle of myself, so Albert asked that they look out for us from a short distance away. I hated asking for that all the same.

The grand magus was not among our number. I guess you could say that he was just acting in accordance with his programming, because even though it was supposed to be a day off from monster-hunting, he had gone to a nearby forest to do just that. I had even asked him if he wanted to come along the night before, once I realized I had essentially only invited Albert. However, he declined.

In short, Yuri was out hunting monsters because my base level had gone up again.

"What level are you at now, Lady Sei?" he had asked me immediately after I asked if he wanted to join us.

On our Stats screen, we could see our base level and the levels of each of our skills. When someone asked what your "level" was, they usually meant your base level.

I hadn't checked any of my levels in a while, so I went ahead and did so. "Uh, give me a moment. *Stats*."

As soon as I spoke the word, a semi-transparent screen that only I could see popped up before my eyes.

SEI TAKANASHI — Level 58/Saint

HP: 5,282/5,282

MP: 6,385/6,385

Battle Skills

Holy Magic: Level ∞

Production Skills

Pharmaceuticals: Level 36

Cooking: Level 25

Yup, it had increased. I was pretty sure I had been at Level 56 the last time I checked, but now the screen plainly stated that I was Level 58.

I leveled up again. When in the world did that happen? Maybe it was while we were running around purging all the black swamps.

“I’m Level 58 now.”

As soon as the words left my lips, everyone who overheard voiced their disbelief.

“What?!”

“Huh? Your level is that high, Sei?!”

“You mean to say that she’d be even stronger than us if we put a sword in her hands?”

“No way!”

I realized then that I had likely never mentioned my level in front of the knights. Among the knights and mages, the knight commander and grand magus had the highest levels, and even they were only in the forties. It was only natural that everyone would be astonished.

Amidst the chaos, the grand magus sat frozen, a smile plastered on his face. That made it all the more ominous that he didn’t offer a comment.

“L-Lord Drewes?” I addressed him timidly, but he didn’t reply.

Uh-oh. Should I try calling to him again?

As I fretted over what to do, Yuri suddenly resumed functioning. “Fifty-eight...”

“What was that?”

However, he was still having trouble processing what I had said and continued

to repeat himself. “Did you say ‘fifty-eight’?”

“Um, yes...?”

Yuri had been working hard to level up so that he could use his Appraisal Magic on me. Once someone hit the forties, it became more difficult to level up, so it required a lot of effort. Nevertheless, Yuri had endeavored to catch up to me by killing monsters as often as he could. I hadn’t asked him his level recently, but I knew it had increased since our first meeting.

However, it was possible that the gap between us had once more widened now that I had leveled up again. Whenever Yuri got close to drawing even with me, the gap widened once more. It had to feel like a recurring nightmare for him. No one could be surprised to see him so shaken.

As I struggled to find something to say, Yuri suddenly recovered himself. “Heh heh heh... I see. You’re Level 58 now... Lady Sei, I appreciate the invitation, but I must regretfully decline. I have a bit of business I must attend to on the morrow.”

“Y-you do?”

“Yes. Although please do invite me next time.”

“Uh, okay. I will.”

I’m guessing he means he’s going to find monsters to fight? It was an easy assumption to make based on the course of our conversation. But I didn’t want to put a damper on Yuri’s mood if he had found his motivation, so I dropped the subject there.

I wonder how many levels he’ll gain while we’re here in Hawke’s Domain? Part of me wanted to support Yuri, but another part felt weird at the thought of letting him get strong enough to see my Stats.

Well, I guess there isn’t much to be done about him, I thought as we arrived at our destination.

The carriage came to a stop, and Albert stepped out with me on his heels. I grasped his hand as I stepped down, and brown hair fell into my vision.

I hadn’t worn this disguise the first time I went out with Albert, but I was

wearing a brown wig and glasses just as I had when Jude and I toured Morgenhaven. Due to my travels around the country to purify the black swamps, everyone knew that the Saint had an unusual hair color. In other words, it was highly likely that my hair color was a dead giveaway. I was already pretty likely to be recognized given my company, but some people would probably be fooled by the wig.

I had also opted for this disguise because we didn't have many guards with us.

After stepping out of the carriage and walking for a bit, we arrived at the market. Just like in the royal capital, tents lined both sides of the street and each stall overflowed with a variety of goods for sale. The market was also teeming with people. It felt a bit smaller than the one in the capital, but it was sizable in its own right. That was as it should be, as I believed the capital of Hawke's Domain was one of the largest cities in Salutania.

"Wow, this place is so busy!" I exclaimed.

"It *is* the largest market in the region," Albert told me, confirming my suspicions. "The sausage vendor is farther down the way. Let's take our time and peruse the other tents as we make our way to it."

"Okay!"

We instantly began to investigate the different vendors. Given that the storefronts in the vicinity had heaps of vegetables on display, we were likely in the area designated for produce. The vendors were selling vegetables I had seen in the capital as well as vegetables I hadn't. I suspected that all the produce was harvested in the domain, as Salutania hadn't yet developed a method by which to transport fresh vegetables. Therefore anything fresh had to be locally grown.

"Oh!" Upon spying a rarity, I stopped in front of one of the shops.

The store had a pile of what looked like savoy cabbage. I had never seen this kind of cabbage in the capital, so perhaps that meant it could only be grown in Hawke's Domain.

"What is it?" Albert looked at me curiously.

"This is cabbage, right?" I asked. "I don't think I've ever seen it back home."

“Huh. I guess I haven’t either, now that you mention it.”

Unfortunately, Albert didn’t know the name of the vegetable, but the shopkeeper stepped in to explain. “You’re from the capital, Miss? I’m surprised you recognize these cabbages. We borderlanders are the only ones who can grow ’em.”

So I was right that this vegetable was exclusive to Hawke’s Domain. “Uh, I ate one a long time ago, that’s all,” I said. “They taste really good when they’re stuffed.”

“They sure do, with those strong leaves. They’re great for stews too!”

Compared to the cabbages sold in the capital, the savoy variety had thicker leaves, and only the soft ends could be enjoyed raw. But the leaves did have a nice pattern, and they were perfect for boiling.

As I chatted up the shopkeeper, Albert listened and nodded in admiration. “We actually serve stuffed cabbage here in the winter. You’ve made it before as well?”

“No, I’ve never made it, but I think I know how.”

I got the gist, broadly speaking, but I had never cooked stuffed cabbage because it was kind of a production.

However, we had actually found savoy cabbage, and moreover, it was in season. I was sure these would be truly delicious when stuffed, and...I wanted to try it.

I shifted my focus from the pile of savoy cabbages to Albert. He had a somewhat rueful look. I recognized that expression. It was the same one that the head of the institute frequently wore, so I knew what it meant.

He also wanted to try stuffed cabbage made by my hand, but now he was feeling down because I’d said I’d never made them before.

Nngh... Now that I’ve seen that expression, I have to make them. I mean, I do really want some too!

“Um,” I started hesitantly.

“Yes?” said Albert.

“I seem to have a new craving, now that we’ve found the right kind of cabbage for the recipe. Could I borrow a kitchen?”

Albert’s eyes were sparkling before I finished the question. It was all too obvious. Of *course* he said, “Yes.”

“Thank you!”

“You needn’t thank me. I’d like to try them too.”

I knew it! Albert grinned joyfully as he said that, final confirmation that my hunch had been dead on.

Yeah, I liked it when he looked happy—*way* better than when he looked crestfallen.

We were both pleased by the outcome, and our smiles deepened as we gazed at each other. The look on my face made Albert cover his mouth with the back of his hand and glance away.

“Heh heh.”

What a strange laugh, I thought. “What?”

Albert’s answer was totally unexpected: “It’s just been a while since I last got to try one of your new recipes before Johan.”

“It has?”

“Indeed, since Klausner’s Domain.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right.”

“Ever since then, whenever you make a new dish, I always hear about it from Johan first.”

Albert seemed a bit sheepish to be smiling out of pleasure that he was getting to eat one of my new dishes before his friend. Despite myself, I found his expression adorable—though I kept that feeling locked up tight in my heart. A grown man likely wouldn’t have wanted to hear me say as much, but I was free to think whatever I wanted.

Speaking of Johan, I have to wonder what that’s all about. Knowing him and his personality, he was telling Albert about the new dishes I made on purpose.

Was he doing it to tease Albert? Sheesh.

As I was feeling exasperated by Johan's behavior, Albert finished placing an order for the cabbages. It seemed like he had ordered more than I needed. Perhaps he was getting some for everyone in the manor? Back in Klausner's Domain, the castle chefs had followed my recipe to make a meal for everyone in addition to Lord Klausner's family, so maybe that was his plan.

"Could you please have these delivered to my residence?" Albert whispered.

"Yes, my lord!" The shopkeeper beamed; he didn't look at all surprised when Albert told him where to send the cabbages. It seemed like a certain someone had been identified as the third son of the local lord.

With that, the savoy cabbages were sent to the Hawke estate. Someone there would pay for them, so the two of us bid the shopkeeper farewell and headed to the next merchant.

The vendor selling the dried sausages was on the opposite end of the market from the vegetable stalls. There were a few other shops selling cured and processed meats along the way, but Albert guided us straight to the right place—he had asked the maid for the vendor's exact location.

The shop sold not only dried sausages but uncooked ones, as well as ham.

I wonder how they taste? I thought as I looked over the other meat products.

"Welcome!" said the shopkeeper. "Oh, who do we have here? Aren't you the young master of House Hawke?"

I looked up to find a woman with the stocky build of a butcher, as was proper for someone who owned this kind of shop. She was eyeing Albert with a surprised look on her face. They didn't seem like acquaintances, so I had to assume that she recognized Albert's lineage from his features.

Albert nodded with a crooked smile, at which the woman grinned. "Thank you so much for coming today!"

Then she looked at me. Her eyes went wide for a moment, and she glanced back and forth between Albert and me several times before her smile returned

to her face. "I see you've finally chosen a bride. Congratulations!"

Bride...? Congratulations? Gasp! She couldn't have thought...

I was dumbfounded by the shopkeeper's conclusion. My head snapped in Albert's direction, and he locked eyes with me. I was sure I wasn't imagining the faint glow on his cheeks, which made my own face start to warm as well.

We stood frozen for a moment, staring at each other. Then Albert recovered himself and cleared his throat.

"No, she is my...associate from the capital," he tentatively explained with a bashful look. It didn't have the intended effect.

"Oh my. Look at me, jumping to conclusions. I'm so sorry about that." The lady nodded complacently, though she didn't sound at all sorry for her misstep.

I really wanted to ask why she would make that kind of assumption, but now that Albert had denied it, I couldn't.

My heart was beating a bit faster than normal. I supposed I was anxious or something, but I slapped a stiff smile on my face so no one would notice.

The shopkeeper then eyed me again. I straightened my posture out of fear of what she might blurt out next, but she wore a different, more apologetic expression as she said, "I'm sorry to you as well, Miss."

"It's all right. Please, don't worry about it."

"My thanks. So, what are you here for today?"

"We heard about your dried sausages."

"Dried sausages, is it?" The shopkeeper pointed at her wares. "We have two kinds for sale."

I was pretty sure we had been served only one flavor the night before, so it was wonderful to hear that she had more varieties available. Neither were flavors I had been able to try, and I was interested in both.

"What flavors did you say they were?"

"This variety is seasoned with salt using a traditional recipe. The other one is a newer recipe that uses herbs."

A new recipe, was it? When I asked *how* new, the shopkeeper admitted that they had begun selling it only recently. It wasn't the one we had tried yesterday either. That being said, it was made with herbs. I couldn't help but suspect that it was a certain someone's influence that had inspired the creation of this new sausage.

I had heard similar things many times while I traveled across the kingdom to purify black swamps. Usually, it was something like, "I was inspired by rumors that food seasoned with herbs is popular in the royal capital, so I started adding herbs to an old, familiar dish myself."

I got a faraway look in my eye as I wondered if the same thing had happened here. I was curious, so I summoned my courage to ask her myself: "Herbs?"

"Yup. I heard that folks all over the place have started making food with herbs."

"All over the place?"

"All over! Everyone's been raving about dishes that use herbs to season their region's local specialties. So we decided to give it a shot as well."

"Oh, uh, I see."

Huh. This was unexpected. It sounded like she might have combined a couple of my past exploits on her own. I gave her a puzzled look as I thought this over.

I had kicked off both of these trends: dishes seasoned with herbs and dishes made featuring ingredients for which a particular region was known. The herb part was a little obvious, but the local specialties had been popularized after a party I hosted at the royal capital—a food festival, to be precise.

The party had been a big hit with the nobility, and after that, the dishes served at the party had been recreated in other domains. However, it seemed that the rumors had, at some point, gotten jumbled. Now people were saying that the popular thing was dishes seasoned with herbs *and* made with local specialties.

Well, I certainly had yet to hear about that... In any case, sausages seasoned with herbs?

As an employee at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, it went without saying that I was curious. When I thought of herbs that could be added to sausages—and I didn't mean this as a joke—perhaps she was talking about sage? Sage had been used so often in the world I came from that people there had said that sausage was a compound combining words for “pork” and “sage.” That didn't necessarily apply in this world. They hadn't traditionally used herbs to flavor food, so it was more likely that she had used a completely different seasoning.

I really wanted to know which ones she'd used in the sausages, but I was too shy to ask. I had a feeling it would be a company secret or something.

But since we're here and all, I'll just buy some and figure it out myself when we get home. Although I'm not entirely confident that I can discern a subtle herbal flavor like that, I thought.

I was just about to place my order when the woman's eyes widened at the sight of something behind me.

What's up now? I wondered as I looked back. I saw a thickset man walking our way, carrying cargo. Her husband, maybe? “Um?”

As I looked between the two, the shopkeeper gave me a sheepish smile. “Oh, my apologies. This is my husband.”

That tracked.

“Welcome.” The shopkeeper's husband gave us a taciturn greeting.

I replied with a slight bow of my head. “Hello. We're here to peruse your wares.”

The shopkeeper's husband wasn't that tall, but he was so well built that I would have believed it if someone said he was a soldier. The lower half of his face was covered by an ample beard, and his big, wide eyes left quite the impression. He gave off an intimidating air, but the goods he carried in his thick, burly arms dampened the impression.

The shopkeeper's husband was cradling a jute bag filled with all kinds of vegetables and fruits. Ingredients for dinner, perhaps?

I was staring without realizing it, which made the shopkeeper smile, amused. It turned out that her husband had brought ingredients so they could develop new products. After using herbs to make dried sausages, their eyes had been opened to the prospect of new flavors, so they had been experimenting daily to see what else they could incorporate into their sausages.

Usually, her husband worked on making their products and never wandered around the market, but he was here today to search out new ingredients.

That made sense. I nodded as I listened to her, until she started speaking with her husband about Albert and me. Upon hearing that Albert was the son of Lord Hawke, her husband quickly bowed. Then, when he heard that we were visiting from the royal capital, he leaned forward to ask, “From the capital, eh? Have you had a chance to eat one of those new herby dishes?”

“I only get to enjoy them once in a while,” Albert answered.

“I eat them rather frequently,” I confessed.

“Ooh! As it turns out, I just devised some sausages with herbs.”

“We heard as much from your wife and were thinking about buying some to take home.”

“Is that so? Then maybe you wouldn’t mind trying them here and telling us what you think?”

Apparently, his herb-seasoned sausages were well received. However, the people who had tried them had never eaten other herb-seasoned dishes before, so they mostly praised him for his originality. They also said that they liked the flavor, but he wanted the opinion of someone who was already familiar with the famed herb dishes from the capital. Et voila, here we were. He grinned broadly as we confirmed our familiarity.

I’m not sure if I’ll have anything useful to say, but there’s no harm in giving my opinion, right? I could send him a letter with my thoughts via the people who worked at the estate—I hoped they wouldn’t mind the trouble. I agreed with a smile on my face. “I don’t mind at all.”

The husband thanked me happily. “So kind! I’ve got some other questions for you as well, if you don’t mind.”

“Dearie!” The shopkeeper stopped him before he could continue. “Wouldn’t it be better to speak over a table at an inn instead of in front of our shop? Besides, I’m guessing you two have things you need to do, right?”

We didn’t have any plans in particular, but the shopkeeper had a point. We would block other customers if we kept talking in front of their shop, so if we wanted to continue this conversation, it would be best if we did so elsewhere.

The shopkeeper’s husband reached the same conclusion. “Y-yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“If you don’t mind, m’lord, could you spare a bit of your time?”

We paused to consider his request.

As for me, I was super interested to know what kind of herbs he’d been using. Had he used only one or had he added multiple? I still had a feeling it would be a trade secret, so I probably couldn’t ask *which* herbs he had used, but I did want to learn as much as I could based on what he was willing to discuss. It seemed like a good opportunity, one where I could get him to answer some of my questions in exchange for answering his. However, I would feel awful accepting when it would mean dragging Albert along.

Maybe I should say no? I looked at Albert, wanting to know his thoughts.

Albert smiled as he met my gaze. “What would you like to do?”

“I would appreciate being able to discuss the sausages for a little while, if that’s fine with you, Lord Hawke.”

“All right. Let’s go,” he readily gave his agreement.

“Are you sure?” I asked again, just to confirm he was okay with following along with my whims.

His smile deepened. “Of course.”

“Thank you!” I smiled as well, letting my delight shine through.

I turned back to the shopkeeper’s husband, who was also pleased to hear Albert’s consent. He hadn’t even needed persuading.

And so, with Albert's approval, we all headed to the inn where the shopkeeper and her husband were staying.

Along the way, we talked a bit with the sausage artisan and his wife. We learned that the sausage-maker's name was Gerulf and that he and his family lived halfway up a nearby mountain, where they honed their craft. They had set up shop there because the mountainside had the perfect climate for sausage-making and the like. They sold most of their wares at the village at the foot of the mountain, but they also brought some of it to the domain's capital city, where they sold to Lord Hawke's estate and at the market.

I suspected that they brought their wares to market whenever they sold to the lord's estate. It seemed sausages were popular not only with Lord Hawke's family but with the locals as well.

However, Gerulf was enthusiastic when it came to his trade and didn't want to settle for mere popularity. He was devoted to coming up with new and delicious recipes. He'd definitely been excited to hear about the new trends in the capital. Ever since, he had tried to make sausages with herbs, and the flavors he had devised had been unprecedented. He was on fire, developing new products one after another.

I listened to him tell his story as we walked, and we arrived at our destination in no time at all. The inn where Gerulf and his wife were staying was two streets and three blocks down from the market. There were other inns and restaurants nearby, so it was a lively area. A reception desk lay right past the door, and beyond that was the dining hall. This design was pretty typical for Salutanian inns.

Gerulf guided us to the dining hall, and we settled at an open table. A man who looked like the innkeeper emerged from the kitchen in the back. He gave us a quizzical look, but then an expression of amazement crossed his face as he recognized Albert. He quickly bowed. Even here, people could identify Albert by his features.

After Albert gave the innkeeper a calm nod, the man turned to Gerulf. "So, uh, what exactly is your business here?"

“Apologies, but I need to borrow your dining hall for a bit.”

“Now I don’t mind, but—”

“I want them to try my sausages.”

Gerulf and the innkeeper seemed to be on friendly terms, so I could only assume that Gerulf stayed here often.

“They new customers?”

“No, they’re visiting from the royal capital. They say they’ve eaten herb-seasoned dishes before, so I’m after their opinions.”

“You mean for your new sausages, eh?”

“Yup, got it in one.”

We had come here to talk, but now the event had become a sausage-tasting. Once they finished their conversation, the innkeeper returned to the kitchen. When he came back out, he was holding a platter with a pile of thinly sliced dried sausages. “This good?”

“Yup. Thanks for the help. Now, m’lord and m’lady, please take a bite.”

At Gerulf’s urging, Albert and I exchanged a look.

“Let’s have a bite, then.” Albert was the first to dig in. After a bit of chewing, he looked at me and nodded.

I indulged in a munch as well. “Thanks for letting us try them.”

As I bit down, a familiar yet fleeting flavor filled my mouth.

What flavor is this again? I wondered, but it was gone before I could figure it out. I took another slice to try, but I had grown used to the taste and couldn’t detect it again. *Uh, hmm. I’m at a loss here...*

“What do you think of it?” Gerulf asked with a serious look as I finished my second slice.

“I think it’s excellent,” said Albert. “The flavor when you first put it in your mouth is refreshing.”

“Yes, I agree, though I think it would be better if the flavor lasted longer,” I

added.

Gerulf leaned forward. “What?”

Gerulf’s intensity made me tentative to explain myself. “Huh? Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just that my tongue got used to the flavor right away, so I couldn’t really taste it after a moment.”

“You’re saying the flavor would be better if it were stronger?”

“Uh, yes. Maybe even just a little bit?”

“I see!”

I was afraid Gerulf might take offense, but he didn’t. It seemed he agreed with my opinion that the flavor could use some punch.

Gerulf explained that he preferred it a bit stronger himself. However, he had used a lesser number of herbs because he figured only a few people were used to the flavor profile. He was right that many herbs had their own peculiar taste, some of which might repel those who weren’t accustomed to them. The dried herb-sausages they had brought to market this time were mainly a test run to see how people reacted, so I agreed they were right to start cautious. With so few people familiar with the taste of herbs, it was safer to go with a lighter hand.

“If only we could adjust the strength of the flavor,” Gerulf said.

“Adjust it?”

I’d been thinking it would be a good idea to sell mild and strongly flavored sausages separately, but Gerulf didn’t seem inclined to simply offer different types. Although it *would* be nice if he could tweak the flavor to people’s individual preferences, he couldn’t just instantly knead more herbs into the sausages or anything.

While I was mulling over how to make it work, Albert offered a great suggestion. “What if you added the herbs later, like with salt?”

“Add it later...? Oh!” I found myself thinking about ham sprinkled with black pepper. Perhaps they could sprinkle the herbs on the exterior of the dried sausages just like they did with ham?

“You mean that we could flavor the sausage casing rather than knead the herbs into the meat?” Gerulf asked.

“Yeah! Then people who like a strong herbal flavor could eat it as is while those who prefer only the sausage could just peel off the casing,” I said.

“That could certainly work. What a good idea!” Gerulf’s eyes went round as if he had seen the light.

Albert looked as impressed as the innkeeper, who had remained behind to listen to our conversation. Seasoning the casing of ham and sausages wasn’t really a thing in this world yet, so everyone looked awed—and to be fair, to them it was a completely brand-new idea.

“I’d like to try making this immediately, but there’s one more thing I’d like to ask,” said Gerulf. “I hope that’s all right.”

“What would that be?”

At my urging, Gerulf began to explain. He wanted to ask more about herbs. In fact, this was what he had been hoping to pick our brains about back at his shop. He wanted to know what kind of herbs were used in the capital’s dishes. While many people had heard stuff about how herbs and local specialties were all the rage, few knew the specifics of what herbs were actually used in those dishes.

“All kinds,” I said. “But mainly basil, dill, marjoram, oregano, rosemary...”

“Whoa, hold on a second! You can use that many?!” Gerulf interrupted, though I personally didn’t think that I had listed a ton.

He protested that he wouldn’t be able to remember them all, so I focused on telling him which ones went best with meats. There were a whole bunch even when I kept it to just those, so I wound up writing them down for him.

“Do I have any of the herbs you mentioned among these?” Gerulf started unpacking his bag, taking out the things he had purchased that morning. I’d thought the only things he had in there were vegetables and fruits, but he also had herbs and cheeses. He must have just bought whatever caught his eye, because there were some herbs that you couldn’t use for culinary endeavors.

“This is rosemary, and this is basil. And the ones I put aside shouldn’t be used for cooking.”

“So some herbs aren’t edible? Thanks. Guess I’ll go buy the ones I’m missin’.”

I found myself giving him some other tips as well. “If you do, it’d be best to find ones that have been dried. They’re easier to store.”

“Oh! That so? Then I’ll be sure to do that.”

“I also recommend trying to mix the ones I’ve grouped in the notes. You’ll get more intricate flavors.”

Gerulf stopped and stared at me. “You sure know a lot about herbs, Miss.”

Oops. It looked like I had said too much. When I thought about it, ordinary people weren’t exactly well informed about herbs. It was only natural that he’d get suspicious.

Just as I was about to try to explain myself, Albert stepped in to answer, “She’s addicted to herbal dishes.”

Huh? Why? I looked at him in surprise to find him wearing an expression unlike any I’d ever seen on him. Oh, I knew that look. My etiquette instructor had showed me how to wear it. It was the enigmatic smile you were supposed to put on when you didn’t want your conversation partner to realize what you were actually thinking.

“Really?” said Gerulf.

“I’m afraid so. It’s so bad that whenever we’re on an expedition and rest somewhere new, she runs around trying every herbal dish she can find.”

Albert glanced at me, so I rushed to back him up. “Y-yup. That’s right.”

Just how badly had I given myself away? Was Albert afraid that Gerulf might figure out I was the Saint? To be fair, Albert had told the shopkeeper that I was an associate from the royal capital, so maybe he was just trying to keep the story straight. If that was case, it would have been pretty problematic if I had blurted out that I worked for the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora.

Thanks for helping me maintain my cover!

“I’m so happy that I got to eat these new herb-seasoned foods,” I said. “Your dried sausages were all absolutely delicious regardless of whether they had herbs.”

“My thanks. Oh, I know, since you were kind enough to help me out and all, I’ll send you the first test batch of new sausages I develop. I’d love to hear what you think of them.”

“Th-thank you! I’ll be sure to let you know.”

What an unexpected stroke of luck! I hadn’t foreseen him making that offer. Maybe he would even send me dried sausages with herbs sprinkled on the casing. I was really curious to see how they turned out, so I was very pleased when he offered to have them delivered to me.

Making dried sausages was an involved process, so it would take some time before they were ready. We would be staying in Hawke’s Domain for a bit longer, but we would likely be on our way to the royal capital by the time they were ready. Thus we told him to ship the sausages to Albert’s residence there. I was already looking forward to their arrival.

After chatting for a bit longer about other good sausage ingredients, we said our farewells to Gerulf.

I was grinning from ear to ear on our way home as I dreamed about the sausages in our future. Albert suggested we try them together when they arrived. He was also curious to see how they came out.

Discussing our opinions on the new sausages sounded like a ton of fun to me. So, of course, I gave him a delighted yes.

A few months after we returned to the royal capital from Hawke’s Domain, we received a letter from Gerulf along with even more dried sausages than we had anticipated. I thought it strange that they had been delivered directly to the institute and not to Albert’s home, but it made sense after I read the letter.

Gerulf had discovered my true identity as the Saint. He had learned the truth when he went to sell his dried sausages at Lord Hawke’s estate. Lord Hawke had summoned him to inquire about his new sausage varieties. Gerulf had been

surprised that Lord Hawke knew about them, and that was when the lord learned, to his horror, that the Saint herself had inspired Gerulf.

Lord Hawke had ordered Gerulf to tell no one that I had helped him, so Gerulf had written this letter to thank me.

Oh yeah, I remember that when we returned to the manor, Lord Hawke asked me what I thought of the city and I mentioned the sausages. Albert had been so careful not to let anyone know my identity, and I managed to sabotage all that effort. Sorry, Albert...

I lapsed into self-reproach and apologized to Albert the next time I saw him, but he apologized to me in turn. Albert had received a letter from his father notifying him about the affair. He wanted to express his condolences for his own contribution to the incident.

At the time, Albert had feared Gerulf would sell his new sausages with my face attached to them, which was why he had taken pains to separate me from my identity. He was trying to prevent me from becoming a poster girl without my knowledge.

However, while one could say that I had helped, all I had done was give Gerulf ideas. Gerulf was the one who'd actually made the sausages. If he had associated them with me, I would have felt like I was stealing his work, which would have been awful. As such, I was thankful that Albert had been so considerate.

It seemed that Lord Hawke had picked up on his son's consideration as well. The proof lay in that he had instructed Gerulf to keep my involvement a secret.

When the dried sausages did go on sale, no one mentioned the Saint's involvement. Ultimately, those dried sausages sprinkled with herbs were incredibly delicious. Just as we hoped, people were able to adjust the flavor to their liking, and they were so popular that even people far from Hawke's Domain ordered them.

In the end, Hawke's Domain gained another local specialty.

Act 2:

Hot Springs

A SHORT WHILE after Albert and I went to the market, we had a debriefing about the monster situation. According to the scouts who had returned from a survey, significantly fewer monsters were manifesting around the mining settlement where we had found the black swamps. The miners said that they would be able to deal with them without the aid of the knights.

Although I was relieved to hear this good news, it was too soon to relax. The Hawke Borderlands were much larger than I had thought, so they weren't done surveying the whole region. The knight commander finished the meeting by reminding everyone to keep up their guard as they continued their investigations.

Thus we wound up staying in Hawke's Domain a bit longer.

While the knights were out surveying the territory, I spent my time relaxing in Lord Hawke's manor. As for what I did with my time, I went out to the nearby forest to gather herbs and made potions for the knights. I still felt like I wasn't doing much, and I started to feel guilty for going about my days without a care in the world.

That was when the vegetable we had ordered from the market arrived: savoy cabbages, with those delicious, detailed veins on their leaves. Albert's desire to eat stuffed cabbages were still fresh in my mind.

Propelled by my feelings of guilt, I ran to ask Lord Hawke for permission to use his kitchens. He instantly said yes. Thanks to the help of the manor's chefs, the stuffed cabbages turned out wonderfully.

I was a bit stymied because they expected me to use herbs, as I was the leading figure in the popular field of herb-seasoned dishes back in the royal capital. I barely remembered the recipe from my world, so I wound up relying heavily on the one the manor chefs used. As a last resort, I threw some bay laurel—also known as bay leaf—into the pot while the cabbages were

simmering. I hoped that would meet their expectations. Based on their shouts of joy when they tasted the end product, that seemed to do the trick.

“You made these stuffed cabbages, Lady Takanashi?”

“Yes. Although I don’t think they’ll taste too different from what you’re used to.”

The stuffed cabbages were being served during dinner with the family members of House Hawke, as was custom. Whenever I went somewhere and cooked, it was nearly guaranteed that the members of the house who ruled that domain would partake. That proved to be the case here as well.

Lord Hawke looked deeply moved as he tasted my cooking, but I knew that savoy cabbages were commonly eaten throughout Hawke’s Domain. Moreover, stuffed cabbages was already a traditional dish in this region, so I doubted it looked any different either.

Maybe it tastes a little new with that bay leaf? Will Lord and Lady Hawke like it anyway? I watched them anxiously as they chewed.

“The fragrance is a bit sweeter,” Claudia—Lady Hawke—commented after she tried the soup.

“Yes, though this scent does seem familiar,” her husband agreed.

“I added bay leaf while it was boiling, so it might be that.”

“Bay leaf? They say that’s good for joint pain, right?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s also an herb that promotes digestion and absorption of food.”

Just as Lord Hawke said, bay laurel helped to suppress inflammation and pain. Because of that, the leaves were also boiled to make a medicinal tea. Perhaps he recognized the smell because he had drunk that tea before.

“If it promotes digestion, then perhaps we can eat more than we usually do,” Albert said, just as I had expected.

“You shouldn’t overeat just because of that!” I said offhandedly, using the same tone I would have at home.

That made the other people at the table chuckle. It was then that I

remembered that Albert's parents were with us. I glanced around and saw not only Albert's mother but his father trying to contain their laughter. Eep! That left me feeling a bit embarrassed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Albert's brows knit together. His ears were red, so he was probably a bit flustered too. Albert noticed me looking at him and returned my gaze. As our eyes met, his expression relaxed, and he laughed sheepishly. I wound up smiling wider in turn.

"Come to think of it, Lady Takanashi, you'll be staying with us for a little while longer, yes?" Lady Hawke asked as we finished the main course and moved on to dessert.

"Indeed. I heard as much from Sir Hawke." According to Albert, we would remain in the domain until the knights finished their survey of the entire region.

Lady Hawke smiled. "Then perhaps you would like to visit our villa?"

"Your villa?"

"Yes. It's located in a village a bit far from here, but it's near a lake, so it has the loveliest view."

A villa by a lake? I feel like they mentioned that before. Why did that come up again? I wondered.

Lady Hawke's next words jogged my memory: "We also have a hot spring there."

"A hot spring?!" Despite myself, my voice came out a bit louder than was acceptable at a dinner table. It was a faux pas, but those words were just so unbelievably wonderful to my ears. A *hot spring*! "Is this the same hot spring at the lake shore that you told me about before?"

"Yes, that's right! You remember." Lady Hawke nodded, a smile still gracing her face.

If I correctly recalled that prior conversation, the villa was located in a village on the shore of a lake in the northern stretch of the domain. There were several hot springs in that area, one of which was at the Hawke villa.

The one Lady Hawke was describing now was the same one we had discussed

before. I believed she had recommended that we visit it during that conversation too. Albert had said we could go after we took care of all the monsters.

I had completely forgotten it after everything that had happened, but Lady Hawke had done the remembering for us.

“I heard you faced many difficulties in the mine. If you have the time, you should soak in the hot spring to recover from your fatigue.” Lady Hawke told me this with a smile on her face, and I could practically see the halo shining around her.

“Thank you!”

I was exceedingly grateful for the offer. It had been some time since our return from the expedition, but I absolutely wanted to take her up on it.

Lady Hawke grinned happily at my eager response.

And so, thanks to Lady Hawke’s enthusiasm, we got ready to go straightaway and left for the villa a mere three days later.

The Hawke villa was located about an hour or two north of the borderlands capital by carriage. Our group consisted of me, Albert, and some knights acting as our guards. It was about one-third of the company who had come with us from the Salutanian capital. Since the knights needed to recuperate too, they were going to take turns on guard duty while we stayed at the villa.

The villagers lived in a settlement a little ways off from the villa. This was the location of the hot spring for knights and soldiers employed by House Hawke. Lord Hawke had told the knights accompanying us to make use of it. Consequently, a fierce battle had broken out to determine who our escort would be. I wouldn’t say we had only a handful of knights, but neither was it a very large group. It was overall fewer than I had expected.

I’d thought that perhaps Lord Hawke and his wife would join us, but unfortunately, they had a prior engagement that they couldn’t afford to abandon. Albert had been thinking the same thing, but when I watched his mother tell him why they couldn’t go, she had the strangest look on her face.

Speaking of people who were in absentia, the grand magus had also bowed out. I'd invited him along because I knew he was on break as well, but he declined. Apparently he had heard that there was a location near the villa where even stronger monsters roamed, so he'd headed there instead. I had no idea what he was thinking, going out to slay more monsters even though he had time off, but I supposed it was in line with his character.

"I'm still really surprised. I had no idea that Lord Drewes knew how to ride a horse."

We were chatting about Yuri while we rode in the carriage toward the villa. Our company had gathered in the same spot before we left, and it just so happened that people going out to hunt monsters had gathered there as well. Yuri had been among them, wearing his usual smile as he said hello, though he had been in an unusual spot: on horseback. He'd just been right up there in the saddle, easy as you please.

He normally rode in a carriage with me whenever we went anywhere, so I'd never guessed he knew how to travel any other way. So of course I was surprised to see him sitting astride an actual, factual horse.

"Everyone in the military divisions—such as the Orders or the Royal Magi Assembly—learns how to ride at the academy," Albert explained when I idly expressed my surprise. He was beside me in the carriage this time around, though it wasn't just because Yuri's seat had gone vacant.

"Lord Drewes did mention that. Is it a requirement?"

"Indeed. You can't join the military if you don't know how to ride. Although most people who want to work at the palace take the horseback riding courses as well."

"I see."

Yuri had said as much when I blurted out, "You know how to ride?" without thinking. He told me he had learned at the Royal Academy. I thought it odd that Yuri would bother, seeing as the only thing he cared about even a little was magic, but it made sense if it was required. In other words, he'd had to learn horsemanship in order to join the Royal Magi Assembly.

“Wait...” I murmured.

“What?”

“Um, so, does this mean that everyone who works at the palace knows how to ride?”

“Well, pretty much.”

If Albert said that *everyone* who wanted to work at the palace learned, then did that mean that Johan, Jude, and even Aira knew how to ride?

The thing was...I didn't.

As I thought about it, a cold sweat ran down my back. This was amounting to an even bigger shock than Yuri's horse-related expertise. I wasn't currently taking any such class, but given everything else I was learning at the palace—should I?

Besides, on top of being a researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, which was located on palace grounds, as the Saint I was kind of, sort of also part of the military.

“Sei?” Albert looked at me with concern after I sank into silence.

The guilt was overwhelming, and I confessed. “I'm sorry. I was just thinking that maybe I should take the horseback riding class as well. I do work at the palace, after all.”

Albert put a thoughtful hand on his chin. “It would certainly be handy if you knew how to ride, but I doubt many occasions would call for you to do so.”

“Well, it might be convenient to be able to ride back and forth between the palace and the institute.”

“I see. But if you did, then I'd have fewer opportunities to bring you home.”

“Uh, I suppose.”

Albert's sidelong glance and crooked smile made my heart skip a beat.

I mean, side glances from any gorgeous guy are always a powerful move, but they're especially powerful coming from someone I know and like. If he asked me for anything with that look on his face, then...I had a feeling I would hand it

over no matter what. *No, wait a minute, calm down, me! You can't just go around agreeing to everything someone asks of you!*

As I wrestled with my feelings, Albert chuckled and turned his face away. I couldn't hear him, but I saw his shoulders trembling, so I could tell he was stifling his laughter.

Ugh... He was just teasing me. Sigh! I wish he'd stop doing that every chance he got.

I groaned loudly, and soon he was able to suppress his chuckles.

"I was also thinking that, you know, I'm kind of in the military myself. So that would be another reason to know how to ride," I said to change the subject.

Albert furrowed his brow. "It's true that horsemanship matters for ordinary soldiers."

If the keyword here was "ordinary" soldiers, I could infer his point. *I see. So the Saint is an exception.*

"Moreover, I doubt you'll be going on many expeditions from here on out," he said.

"I suppose."

The situation in Salutania was improving. While everyone was keeping a watchful eye out, the palace had determined that the threat of the black swamps was nearing its end. They hardly ever received reports of new swamps in regions where such things were easily spotted, like the plains. Lately, they had only needed to send me to mines and so forth—the sort of places where swamps were more difficult to locate. However, even before we arrived in Hawke's Domain, fewer and fewer black swamps had been discovered, so the problem was regarded as largely subdued.

That being the case, Albert was right in that I wouldn't need to go on expeditions for much longer. The knights and mages could handle taking care of the remaining monsters on their own, so there was no reason to dispatch the Saint as well. That meant that my work as the Saint would soon be over.

I also wouldn't be able to leave the royal capital again, not like this.

Oh. That means I'll have fewer chances to see Albert as well.

The majority of the time we spent together consisted of monster slaying. For some reason, the moment I realized that those opportunities would disappear, my heart ached. It felt like an enormous rift had ripped open between us.

Huh?

"Although the thought of being able to go out on long rides together does have merit," Albert said.

"Long rides?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

Albert's suggestion brought to mind galloping on horses through meadows. I had ridden on horseback while sitting in front of Albert at the palace, so we'd traveled at a relatively slow speed. If we did it one person per horse, I bet we could ride much faster. The wind would feel lovely too.

This wonderful suggestion made me forget the ache in my heart.

"I think that's a good idea," I said. After imagining this scene, I didn't try to hide my feelings.

"Then it's decided. We'll practice together when you have time," he casually declared.

Could I really take him up on that offer? I was sure that I personally would have free time, but wouldn't Albert still be really busy?

"You'll teach me?" I asked, just in case.

"If you'd like," he replied politely.

My heart felt like it was floating. "Of course I would! Thank you!"

With that, the ache that had run through me vanished completely.

As we discussed what we would do when we arrived at the villa—and when we got back to the royal capital—time passed in the blink of an eye. Soon we had gone far enough to actually see the villa.

A forest of fir trees surrounded the structure. The villagers clearly took good care of them, because sunlight shone through the gaps in the trees, lending the location a peaceful air.

The villa itself didn't look like I had expected. I had imagined it would be a log house, or built of wood with plastered walls, but it was constructed from something entirely different—it was a mansion made of stone. While that wasn't what I had seen in my mind's eye, the surrounding area was idyllic, so I was impressed all the same.

The carriage stopped in front of the villa. Albert helped me step down, at which point I saw that all the people who took care of the villa had already assembled at the entrance. They greeted us, as was customary, then ushered us inside.

I was taken to guest chambers on the second floor that consisted of a bedroom and parlor. The parlor had a large window leading out to a terrace. From there, I could see the sparkling surface of the lake.

The great big lake lay to the west, and the villa had a splendid view, as it stood at a slight elevation. Needless to say, I also had a wonderful view from my chambers on the second floor.

While I gazed out the window, the butler who had shown me to my room explained the villa's amenities. "There's a large bath on the first floor. It draws water from the hot spring, so please feel free to enjoy it."

"I've been looking forward to enjoying the hot spring, so I definitely will later," I said.

"Understood, my lady. Please inform us whenever you desire to do so."

Just as Lady Hawke said, the villa was furnished with a large bath connected to the hot spring.

This place has a great view and quiet scenery, and on top of that, it has a hot spring. What an amazing place to relax. I'll dive right in after I catch my breath, I decided. "Thank you very much."

"Now please feel free to find your ease."

After I took a short break, I headed to the baths. They were way bigger than I had imagined. The room was probably as large as a lecture hall. The ceiling was high, but you couldn't see much because of the steam rising from the tub, which was more of a pool. Based on what I could make out, it seemed that the walls, floor, and even the pool itself were made of marble. I let out an "ooh" of admiration at the sheer extravagance.

Whenever I took a bath at the palace or someone's manor, the maids always made a big fuss and did all kinds of things for me, but today I was alone. It was like a dream. I had asked to be left alone precisely because I didn't want anyone fussing over me so I could enjoy it privately. I had thankfully received permission to go solo.

It felt like an incredible gift, getting to luxuriate in such a giant bath all by myself. Moreover, I couldn't exactly have asked my maids to join me if they were around—they would have said no—so I just had to accept that and get over the guilt.

"Oh, it circulates!"

I moved to the back to see what the whole pool looked like, as I couldn't see it through the steam. The pool was built along the back wall and water flowed swiftly down from tap in the wall and into the pool. The bath water that overflowed from the pool drained back out. I was filled with delight at the sight of this hot spring pool that I had heard so much about—and that the water was constantly pumped in, out, and back again.

I washed my body, then excitedly went to go soak in the pool, where I let out a reflexive sigh. The temperature was a bit low, so I figured I could enjoy it for a long time.

The pool's overall structure didn't seem all that different from those back in my original world. The only thing that differed was the unusual shape of the tap. It resembled the silhouette of the undead dragon's head, so I assumed it was meant to be an ordinary dragon. It was kind of funny, though, since it reminded me of the lion-headed taps from my old world.

Once I had observed the room, all I had to do was revel in the hot water. I leaned against the wall and let myself space out. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep

my mind clear of thoughts for long. I wound up ruminating over all kinds of things.

“It’s going to be over.”

I was thinking about the future. I had been summoned to this world to purify the miasma after it grew too thick, and now that job was almost at its end. I was moved by the thought of closing this chapter in my life. It was probably the kind of feeling everyone got after finishing a big project.

It wasn’t like this was going to be the end of my life in this world. I was probably feeling so oddly calm because I still hadn’t figured out a way to return to my own world. Once I was done purifying the miasma, my day-to-day existence wouldn’t change in any significant way. As such, I simply thought of this as a particular job coming to a close.

These thoughts were kind of calculating on my end, but I was pretty sure that the reason I felt so calm was the conversation I’d had with Albert in the carriage.

I hadn’t thought I would be so *happy* to hear Albert promise to help me learn how to ride. It didn’t make me so elated that I was going to shout for joy, but it definitely filled me with light and fluff.

Is this what love feels like? I didn’t know. I’d never been in love before. I certainly didn’t dislike whatever this sensation was.

Then there was the research I still had to do for my job at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. For the time being, I had no plans to stop working there. So things would remain the same on that front as well.

“Oh...”

Then I remembered something that I didn’t really want to remember. I sighed deeply, slowly adjusting my posture to slide farther underneath the water.

Although I would be done with my purifications, I would still likely have to continue to participate in high society. Numerous people wanted to marry the Saint, so I was definitely going to be invited to all kinds of tea parties and evening parties as well. Up until now, I had declined these invitations with the excuse that I needed to go monster-slaying, but soon I would no longer be able

to whip that out.

To be honest, I still didn't feel anything when it came to marriage as an idea. I'd always vaguely assumed that I would get married someday, but I was happy with my current situation. A big part of me wanted to continue clinging to the floaty feeling I got when I thought about Albert. I was actually kind of enjoying its presence.

I squirmed again and rested my head on the edge of the pool, then closed my eyes.

Okay! I'll forget about high society for now! I came here to relax, so I'm only going to think about pleasurable things. Albert was going to write the report on the events that had transpired in Hawke's Domain so I could get back to business as soon as I returned to the royal capital. I had a bunch of things to do for the herbs I meant to grow during the winter, such as transplanting them into pots and some pruning to go with it.

Oh, and then there were the dried sausages we'd found. Those would keep for a while, so it would be fun to bring them home and have a banquet with the researchers. I just knew that Johan would want to try them, though maybe he already had, seeing as he was friends with Albert.

I also wanted to have tea with Liz and Aira. I doubted I could bring back any borderlands sweets, but I supposed I could ask someone for some recipes. Or would they be reluctant to share them with me? In that case, my friends would just have to make do with some kind of souvenir. I'd be happy just to see them again.

Oh, and when Albert had free time, he would be teaching me how to ride. I wasn't sure if I'd really get the hang of it, but if I did, we could take long rides together. By the time we were doing that, the weather would probably be warm again, so I could make sandwiches and we could go have a picnic somewhere.

I bet Albert will be happy if I make sandwiches packed with herb-seasoned chicken. We could do more than just go on a picnic too. There was something else on my mind...but what?

I suddenly came back to myself and noticed a mist around my chest. I was

feeling a certain familiar emotion again.

I gazed around at the top of the pool, which was covered with a golden mist. It seemed that I had become so relaxed in the hot spring that my magic had poured out of me by accident.

Huh?! What in the world is going on? I was overcome with shock, if only for a moment. Then, since I was the only one in the room, I unleashed the Saint's magic. The whole bathtub glittered.

Once the light subsided, I scooped up some of the water and saw that flecks of gold now floated within it.

My wish in that moment had been hot spring keywords: recovery from exhaustion, easing lower back pain and stiff shoulders, smooth skin, etc., etc.

I had only cast the spell for a moment, so I didn't know the extent of the changes I had bestowed on the water, but I suspected that some kind of miraculous effect had been added.

Fortunately, this hot spring circulated. The water would inevitably be replaced, so soon no trace of my magic would remain.

That was close. The hot spring was warm, but I felt myself break into a slight cold sweat. I decided to get out of the tub before I made some other mistake.



Hot springs, collecting plants, walking around trying different foods for market research... I fully enjoyed getting to pursue nothing but fun, to the point that I began to wonder if it was entirely acceptable for me to be enjoying myself by the time the assessment of the monster situation in Hawke's Domain finally came to a close.

The knights had conclusively determined that fewer monsters were spawning. Everyone was excited by the good news, and we held another celebratory banquet.

A few days after the banquet, it was time for us to return to the royal capital. We stood in front of the carriage, where I said my final goodbye to Lord Hawke.

"Thank you for hosting us on this occasion."

"Don't mention it. It is we who should be thanking you for improving our lands in more ways than one."

Lord Hawke had already thanked me multiple times for my services. Maybe it was because of my nature as a Japanese person, but I felt kind of awful having him bow to me so much. I just couldn't get used to it.

I somehow managed to return Lord Hawke's gentle smile, but I worried that it looked forced.

"We shall head to the royal capital when the social season begins," Lady Hawke said. "I do so hope you'll come and visit us at our manor there."

"I believe that by then, we will have completed the draft plan for turning our hot springs into a tourist attraction, so hopefully I can call upon you to seek your opinion," Lord Hawke added.

After I returned from the hot spring, I had taken tea with Lady Hawke and we had discussed beauty treatments. We had spoken in excited detail when I mentioned that cosmetics could be made from hot spring waters, but I'd realized that it unfortunately wouldn't be possible to make them from the springs in Hawke's Domain. The ones here just didn't do anything for skin conditions.

Instead, I suggested developing the village where the hot springs were located. Lady Hawke remembered our previous conversation during our first

banquet and asked how hot spring villages operated back in my birthplace. I told her about the deluxe public bath houses and spas they had in Japan, which got Lady Hawke incredibly pumped up. I tried to change the subject to calm her down a bit by suggesting that the hot springs could be made available to the public instead of just the soldiers. The soldiers could use them for free as a professional perk while they could have commoners pay a fee to use the facilities.

While the hot springs in the village weren't beneficial for skin conditions, they did remedy inflammation of muscles, joints, and lungs. I believed there would be a demand for these benefits even among the general populace.

Once I mentioned this, I had not only Lady Hawke's but Lord Hawke's interest. He started asking me questions too, and after telling him about all the different kinds of hot spring facilities in Japan, he quickly decided to develop the village as a tourist attraction. It probably came as no surprise, but he made up his mind lightning fast.

As I debated how to respond to Lord and Lady Hawke's invitations, Lady Hawke turned to her son. "Al, I hope you'll come to visit every so often as well."

"Of course. Let me know when you arrive in the capital."

It was kind of heartwarming to see this exchange between mother and child. As I looked on, full of warm and fluffy feelings, Albert told his parents to send their invitations to me through the palace.

All of my invitations to tea parties and the like were sent there. This measure had been put in place when I still knew nothing about the noble factions and the relationships between the houses; they'd wanted to ensure that I didn't accidentally accept an invitation from someone with untoward intentions.

However, after my lessons at the palace, I was pretty sure that I knew who to be on the lookout for. It was a pain to properly word rejection letters, though, so I continued having the palace decline on my behalf.

A son of House Hawke had previously married a princess, so they had close ties to the royal family. As such, the palace would probably send an invitation from House Hawke straight to me, just as they had when Marchioness Ashley reached out.

Even so, I was unsure if it would be all right to accept their invitation without initially routing it through the palace, so I didn't quite know how to respond. I was therefore incredibly grateful that Albert spoke up on my behalf. All noble houses had been informed that invitations addressed to me had to be sent in this manner, so his parents were understanding.

"Well, we should get on our way," I said.

"Indeed. I hope we see one another soon," Lord Hawke said.

"Lady Takanashi, thank you again. I shall look forward to visiting you in the capital," Lady Hawke said.

"Thank you. I shall look forward to visiting you both again as well."

With that, we departed. Albert helped me into the carriage, and a moment later, the vehicle started to move. I waved out the window to Lord and Lady Hawke.

And so, I finished purifying the black swamps and my work as the Saint came to an end, at least for the time being.

Act 3:

The Annex

“H_{MM}.”

“Seeeeiii? Whatcha doing?”

“Oh, hi, Jude.”

Ever since our return from Hawke’s Domain, there had been no news of black swamps being discovered. Although I suspected I could finally hang up my Saintly hat, that didn’t change my daily routine. One day, just as always, I was standing in front of my garden plot at the institute and thinking about planting new herbs.

That was when someone I knew turned up. When I looked back at Jude, he was wearing a curious look on his face.

“I was contemplating where to grow my new herbs,” I explained.

“You mean the ones you collected at Hawke’s Domain?”

“Yup, and some others too.”

Among the plants I had collected up north were some species referred to as “medicinal herbs” because of their effects. A few of them weren’t currently grown at the institute, so I was thinking about cultivating some that would likely prove useful for my research.

But the seeds from Hawke’s Domain weren’t the only ones on my list. I had also received some species from Klausner’s Domain and Zaidera that I wanted to try my hand at as well.

“Hmm. I don’t know which ones are most likely to take, but isn’t it a bit too soon to be planting any?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that way later. It’s just that...”

Jude was right; it was winter. The season wasn’t famous for its perfect herb-growing weather. It was obvious that they’d be doomed if I planted them now,

so I wasn't going to force it. But the thing troubling me was, frankly, the soil.

The seeds we had received from Klausner's Domain and Zaidera were rightfully available to all the researchers at our institute. You can imagine how everyone here—who were to a one totally crazy for herbs—had responded upon receiving these unusual specimens. Every one of them had planted the herbs they were interested in growing. As a result, the entirety of our immense garden had been put to use. There were no free plots left.

"So the problem is where to plant them, then?"

"Yeah. I want a bigger field, but there's just no room."

"Maybe you could use the communal fields?"

"I don't think that'll work either. We can't scale back use of the plots we use to grow potion ingredients for the knights. I have a feeling there'll be competition for those sections as well."

"Ooh, yeah, I bet you're right."

The garden's communal field was commonly used for growing all kinds of herbs that we used at the institute. It was also where we cultivated the herbs we needed to make potions for the Orders. As you might imagine from the word "communal," you could get permission to use part of the fields for a limited time, but the plot wasn't *that* huge. As a result, the researchers were frequently embroiled in fierce quarrels over advanced reservations—even more so recently.

Jude's subject of research was potions, so while he had his own personal garden, he didn't need to expand. He clearly knew how crowded the garden was at this point, though, because he gave me a big nod when I brought up the competition.

"Maybe you should ask Johan?" he suggested.

"Why him?"

"Because I'm sure he's noticed that the garden is packed. He must be trying to come up with some kind of solution. I mean, we could always just buy the herbs we need for the knights' potions."

Jude had a point. Whether you wanted to expand your field or use the communal one, you needed Johan's permission. And anyway, nothing good ever comes of stressing about a problem without telling anybody about it.

"I guess I'll go ask him." I nodded.

Jude nodded back with a smile. "Okay. I think that's a good idea."

I left a waving Jude and headed straight to Johan's office.

"You want to expand your garden?" Johan asked me.

"Yes. I have new herbs that I want to plant when spring arrives, and I don't have enough space."

"Ah, the fields have been pretty full recently, haven't they? I've got a ton of things I'd like to grow too."

Unlike Jude, Johan's subject of research was herbs. He used his privileges as head researcher to keep a personal garden that was larger than everyone else's, and he was using a part of the communal field too. It appeared that the garden was so full that even he was hesitating to add more herbs to his roster. He had been trying to come up with a solution because we were in the same boat.

When I told him why I was visiting his office, he frowned and touched his right hand to his chin. However, epiphany failed to arrive, and he lowered his hand with a hefty sigh.

"I'll try petitioning the palace, but I think expanding the herb garden any further might be difficult."

"Really? There are still so many areas lying fallow, though."

"They're probably using them for something. I've tried petitioning about them before, but they rejected the request."

"So you already bothered them about it..."

"That was before you came to the institute. They might respond differently now."

"Then we *should* petition them again."

I had no idea how long ago Johan had sent his original petition, but perhaps

he was right that times had changed. As they say, it was worth a try. We had nothing to lose by asking.

With my encouragement, Johan's serious expression turned into a grin. I did have kind of had a bad feeling about that face, though.

"What?" I asked, suspicious.

"Well, I'm not sure me sending a petition is the right move. I think you've got a much more efficient way to fix this."

What did he mean? I was honestly wondering what he meant. I furrowed my brow and frowned at him.

Johan was still smiling as he said, "If you tell His Majesty that you desire your own land for growing herbs, I'm sure he would instantly grant the request."

"Are you talking about the land that he offered me before?"

"Well, yeah."

I knew I had a dark premonition!

The king had once offered me lands as recompense, and I had declined at the time. I'd thought that topic was over and done with.

"No way."

Johan gave me a crooked smile when I flat-out shot down his idea. "Still won't budge, huh?"

"I've already received my favors."

In short, I was taking lessons at the palace and had access to the Forbidden Depository. Those were the favors I had accepted in lieu of territory. I couldn't ask to be granted land so long after the fact!

But Johan seemed to have a different opinion. "Yes, but you've done a great deal more for the kingdom since. I bet you he's planning to come up with another reward for you."

"But I wouldn't be able to manage a domain on my own."

"You could just leave it to people you trust, like you do with your company."

“It’s not that easy.”

By “done a great deal more for the kingdom,” was he referring to how I had traveled around purifying black swamps all over Salutania? Had I not already received remuneration in addition to my wages from the institute? *Don’t tell me the stuff they’ve already given me was just for the expeditions...*

Were they planning to give me a bonus for purging the swamps?

I had all kinds of income in addition to my wages from the institute, such as the dividends from my company and the compensation everyone got for participating in monster-slaying expeditions, but it would be irresponsible to blithely shrug it all off just because I could live without worrying over funds. I had to find out for sure. Also, while I didn’t remember anyone saying something about this kind of thing, if Johan said the palace was going to reward me again, then it was likely true.

My own domain, huh? Even though Johan’s acting as if it’s just like everything with the company, I feel like the scale of responsibility I’d be undertaking would be way different. But maybe it wouldn’t be? No, even if I did have a steward managing the lands, it’s just too conceptually big. I have cold feet already.

“But if you had your own domain, you could grow whatever herbs and as many herbs as you want.”

“Uh...”

“And not just herbs either. You could likely grow Zaideran crops too.”

“Uhh...”

“And His Majesty would be sure to assemble a contingent of servants for you. I’d take the offer, if I were you.”

Although my mouth was saying no, Johan could see I was conflicted and continued to tempt me.

Having a vast field with which I could do whatever I wanted certainly had its appeal. I could even grow all the crops I desired too, which I couldn’t really do at the institute.

Wait, does that mean I could grow rice as well?! No, no, wait—calm down,

me! I shook my head back and forth, casting away the temptation. “No, I couldn’t!”

“Okay, fine, fine.”

It was a highly appealing proposal, but I just didn’t have it in me to be a lady ruling over a whole gosh-darn domain. Besides, if I did become the lady of a domain, I would have to live far away from the institute. The thought kind of bummed me out.

Johan gave up and dropped the topic with a smile.

Several days after that conversation, he delivered a shocking announcement: “We’ve been granted permission to build an annex for the institute.”

What?!

“What do you mean by an annex?”

An annex was like a branch office; a part of the institute would split off and set up in a separate place.

Was that what Johan was referring to when we discussed expanding the herb garden the other day? Surely he didn’t suggest this to His Majesty by telling him that I wanted land, right?

I peered at Johan, feeling just a tad concerned. Johan smiled wryly as he began to explain.

As it turned out, Johan had resubmitted his petition. He was subsequently summoned by the prime minister to discuss a different matter. The prime minister had wanted to discuss my reward again, just as Johan said was going to happen.

As expected, they immediately offered land as a potential reward. And like before, they also offered to grant me a title as well. Johan declined on my behalf, based on our conversation. It took a lot of effort to decline an offer from someone in such a high position, so I was glad that Johan had done it for me.

Ultimately, they settled on monetary compensation.

“Okay, I follow you so far, but what does that have to do with being granted permission to build an annex?” I asked.

“After we finished discussing your reward, we chatted and I asked if we could expand the grounds of the institute.”

According to Johan, the palace was eager to expand the herb garden. However, because there was no unused land in the periphery of the institute, they were unable to do so directly. That was when they proposed building an annex. There was a perfect location just a short distance outside the royal capital, so they suggested constructing it there.

“Does that mean the institute will be split?”

“While we’ll be calling it an annex, it’ll mainly be an herb garden. I wouldn’t say we’re splitting the institute itself.”

“So, basically, we’re expanding the herb garden outside palace grounds.”

“More or less.”

Each kind of herb required specific conditions to grow. One of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora’s duties was to research the optimal conditions for growing every variety.

I wonder how far the new herb garden will be from the capital? If it’s not too far, I imagine the soil and climate won’t be so different. Although I suppose it would be useful if there was a big difference too. Oh, but this all came about because we wanted to expand the herb garden, so maybe they’ll purposefully seek out an environment that’s similar to the one we have now.

As I got lost in thought, Johan started grinning. “You interested?”

“Huh?”

“In the new garden.”

He saw straight through me—I was fantasizing about a new environment to experiment in. I was a bit embarrassed, but I nodded.

Johan nodded several times as well. “Me too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’ll be easier to maintain an air of secrecy out there. We’ll be able to grow herbs that we haven’t been able to until now.”

“Really?!”

Johan wore a pleased look as he explained. Since the institute was on palace grounds, we had some security. However, at times important people from abroad came to observe, just as the Zaidaran prince had, so we couldn’t totally prevent outsiders from seeing what we were up to.

The annex would be a completely different matter. We could implement a total ban that prevented unauthorized people from entering. In other words, just as Johan implied, we could grow all the herbs we couldn’t at the institute due to security concerns.

Some of the herbs on Johan’s to-grow list had to be of that restricted variety. He sounded unbelievably excited as he spoke.

“It sounds like it will be very secure,” I said.

“Indeed, especially since Lord Goltz was the one who proposed how to keep it that way. The palace must have some rare and precious plants they want us to cultivate as well,” he said with a meaningful look.

Why are you looking at me like that? Rare and precious plants? I frowned at him for a moment, puzzled. Suddenly I understood what he was talking about. Those words applied to the plants I was growing.

I was cultivating all kinds of plants, from those that were merely unusual to kinds that required a particular environment to thrive. The former included an endemic species I had received from Zaidara while the latter covered the seeds I had received from Corinna. Between them, the ones from Corinna needed to be strictly controlled, as the particular conditions they required were related to my Saintly powers. In short, they needed fields like the ones I had blessed with my magic at Klausner’s Domain and the institute. Besides that, I had recently used my Saint’s magic to force an apple tree to grow, one which had borne fruit with miraculous effects (accidentally).

In order to ensure my physical safety, the palace kept my powers—beyond those that allowed me to purify the miasma—a closely guarded secret. No one

in the public arena knew about these things. Therefore the fields in Klausner's Domain, the institute, and the apple tree were under strict supervision.

Johan's words suggested to me that they were planning to isolate everything that required extra supervision at the annex. Did that mean that all my plants in the institute's gardens were going to be relocated to the new one?

Johan brought me back from my reverie with a teasing tone. "That being said, half the new garden will be yours to use."

I don't know how big this new garden is, but surely it's an exaggeration to say that I'll get half of it.

"Will you get the other half then?" I joked to get revenge.

However, Johan gave me an unexpectedly serious answer. "Yes, but I know everyone will complain about it."

There were other researchers who wanted to grow the herbs we were trying to keep under wraps. They were sure to be frustrated if Johan and I hogged the new garden all to ourselves.

"True. I'm sure everyone else will want to be able to work on things there too. Could we actually do that, though? Let some of the others use the new garden?"

"It should be fine so long as we section off areas based on the degree of secrecy required—and designate who's actually allowed to enter those areas."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Johan's response did wholly circumvent the problem of people potentially seeing what I was growing with my Saintly powers. I was impressed but not surprised that he had come up with an idea so quickly.

"I'll let you know what we're transplanting later. I'd like you to prepare them so they can be moved to the annex once its ready."

"Understood." I nodded as I started considering the steps I would need to take.

A short while later, Johan announced who would be using the annex and what herbs were to be transplanted from the institute. Several people in addition to

Johan and I would be using the annex's garden. A lot of researchers wanted to expand their fields, but there was a limited amount of available land. As a result, several fierce disputes erupted among those who wanted to use the annex. Since they couldn't settle things on their own, Johan wound up picking who got what.

Johan told me that he prioritized those who wanted to grow herbs that required a high degree of confidentiality. So, the people who were chosen were those who wanted to grow the Zaidaran herbs or herbs that required a great deal of caution because they could be used in deadly poisons.

By the time the decision was made, we were all about done getting everything prepared, and we received word that the annex was ready to receive us.

The land we had been given was part of the royal family's holdings. It was close to the capital, so we could commute, and it was said to have wonderfully fertile soil. I thought it most magnanimous of the king to grant us such an excellent place to use as our garden. Perhaps that was just proof of how much importance they placed on the development of herb cultivation and potions.

The town where the annex was located looked like any typical city in the Kingdom of Salutania and was encircled by stone walls. Inside the walls were wheat fields.

The building where the annex would be installed was surrounded by additional walls, and the garden was located within those. When I heard it was behind two sets of walls, I imagined that the annex premises would be small, but they were actually quite spacious.

The annex grounds were huge. The garden took up the majority of those grounds, and it was so large that it rivaled the one we had at the institute.

Our annex would be part of the complex where the territory's magistrate worked. That was partly because only a few people would be working at the annex full time, but it was also because the magistrate's hall was large, so they'd decided to share it. How big am I talking? Nearly as big as a noble manor in the capital. There were also a number of rooms that never saw use, so we

claimed them for our own. It would have taken time and money to build a new structure, so I thought this was a great way to effectively utilize unoccupied places they already had on hand.

We were provided with several rooms, including ones for clerical work as well as rooms for brewing potions and the like. As for a parlor for receiving guests and guest rooms for researchers who stayed overnight, we would be sharing some additional rooms with the magistrate. The magistrate would take care of keeping the common areas clean, which I thought made us quite fortunate.

It would have been no exaggeration to call this our second institute, with its vast grounds and prominent structure. You would have thought they would put someone other than Johan in charge, but they didn't.

When we first talked about it, I feared he would wind up overworking himself, running both the annex and the institute. According to him, though, he was totally fine. The magistrate was helping him by writing monthly reports. I thought that meant the magistrate would have it rough instead, but apparently it wasn't an issue, as he had been managing the land for a long time now.

Needless to say, I was impressed by the competency of both Johan and the magistrate.

I was crouched in the annex's garden, checking on the herbs that we had moved from the institute, when I heard someone approach from behind. I looked back to find an incredibly charming and beautiful woman grinning at me.

"Oh, hello."

"Hello, Lady Sei."

The woman had sky-blue hair in a loose updo and arching, almond-shaped eyes that were silver-gray. She was *very* pretty and had a mole by the corner of her left eye that lent her a coquettish air. Though she was dressed modestly as always, that didn't diminish the combination of her curves and her striking allure.



This was the magistrate's secretary, Zara. She appeared to be about the same age as me. Though I knew she was an adult, I didn't know exactly how old she was. I did know she was still unmarried, and as she was a single woman in my age range, we'd become friends over time as I began coming to the annex.

"How are they?" Zara asked as she peered over my shoulder.

"They appear to be doing pretty good, thankfully. I think they've managed to take root."

"That's great news." Zara's smile deepened. She was able to enter this high-security part of the garden because she had permission from the king. As the magistrate's secretary, the king placed a tremendous amount of trust in her.

This probably went without saying, but the magistrate had permission to enter the garden as well. In addition to the magistrate and Zara, the gardeners employed by the magistrate also had permission. While the plants we were growing in the annex's garden were highly classified, they were also difficult to cultivate. We needed the gardeners' help because of their special expertise.

They hadn't been offhandedly granted permission to join our work, obviously. Everyone who had permission to enter the garden—including me, Johan, the researchers, the magistrate, and the gardeners—had signed a non-disclosure agreement with the royal family to tell no one what we knew about its contents.

"Are you on break, Zara?"

"Indeed I am. I just got my hands on some new tea leaves, so I was hoping to invite you for a cup."

Zara loved tea and always had it during her breaks; she'd done so even before the annex was established. Soon after we set up at the annex, she had spied me drinking a cup of herbal tea. That was the first time she'd spoken to me. Perhaps we had become friends and gotten along so well from the start because of our shared love of the stuff. Now yet again Zara was here to invite me to enjoy some.

I wonder what kind of leaves she got this time? We can easily get herbal varieties, so maybe it's black tea? Whatever the case, I can't wait to find out.

“Thank you! I would love to join you,” I responded enthusiastically to her lovely offer, making Zara’s smile deepen even more.

As a tea lover, Zara was very particular about her brewing. That was why she always made it for us—but to be clear, she was super good at it. She made black tea that day, and it was as delicious as if it had been brewed by a palace maid. You could even have said that it was in a league of its own.

I wonder if I could get her something nice for always making such delicious tea for me? Recently I’d been racking my brain, trying to come up with a good idea. As I was mulling it over and we drank together, the topic of cosmetics came up and I got an idea.

The cosmetics sold by the Saint’s company in the capital were considered incredibly fashionable by noble ladies, so much so that the most popular products were on backorder. I wouldn’t dream of cutting the line, so I wouldn’t do that, but I could give Zara something I’d made personally. I was scared my fifty-percent-bonus curse might do something weird to it, but if I just tweaked the recipe a bit, I could probably just blame any additional effects on the new ingredients.

Having come to that conclusion, I asked if Zara would like me to make her something.

Zara’s eyes sparkled with delight. “Oh my! Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not. It’ll be my way of saying thanks to you for always making me such delicious tea.”

Voila!

Just as we had settled on this exchange, we finished the pot and our little party came to a close.

What should I give her? The rose oil cream was on backorder, but that was actually pretty pricey as well. While I would’ve loved to make it for a special gift, Zara might think it too much. Maybe it would be better to go with something from the standard line. That series was made with lavender oils. I would also still be tweaking the recipe a bit.

That reminded me that I had an oil that would go well with lavender. I had made it recently, and it had been wondrously beneficial in and of itself. It was also a precious ingredient, so I wouldn't be using it to make a new product for the store—which made it perfect for hiding the effects of my fifty-percent-bonus curse. *I'll get started on making it as soon as I get to the institute*, I thought as I walked toward the garden with a spring in my step.

“Lady Sei!”

Two days after I gave Zara her gift and visited the annex garden, I heard someone call my name as I was heading off to check on a certain herb. I recognized the woman's voice and looked back to find, just as I'd expected, Zara walking over to me with a soft smile on her face.

I had only just arrived at the annex. Daily business at the palace had started about an hour ago, so you could have said that it was still first thing in the morning. Although the annex was located outside the capital, I assumed that work there started at the same time as it did for us at the institute.

I normally talked to Zara during breaks. She had never approached me at this hour before. While I thought it odd, I smiled back at her. “Good morning, Zara.”

“Good morning. Thank you so much for the cream you gave me the other day!” The first words out of her mouth were words of gratitude.

In other words, the special gift I'd devised as thanks of my own for her superlative tea-making skills. Judging by her appearance, it had worked wonders.

“Don't mention it,” I said. “Your skin didn't have any bad reactions, did it?”

“Not at all! If anything, my skin has been in splendid condition since I started using it.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

I was pleased to see her delight. As I smiled back at her, her gaze filled with hope as she said, “That cream you gave me is sold at your store, right?”

“No, I actually made that one special.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. The recipe is a bit different from the ones on the market.”

I had expected this question. I’d only ever wound up selling cosmetics in my shop after I once gave some to Liz. Once her friends got wind of it, I’d been hounded by a horde of young ladies from well-to-do families asking to buy more from me. I received the same requests from noble ladies whenever I socialized. I’d therefore had a feeling Zara would ask the same, if she liked the cream. However, this time I wouldn’t be able to tell her where she could get more. At any rate, the ingredients were far more expensive than the ones for rose-oil cream, which was our most popular product.

At first I had made this new cream just for myself, since it was so expensive, but I had, ah, accidentally become a bit excited. Now I’d made something even more expensive than the rose cream. I could thankfully conceal the effects of my fifty-percent-bonus curse, but I couldn’t deny that I had *probably* overdone it.

“So this won’t be sold in your store?”

“No. It’s made using special ingredients.”

The cream I had given Zara used lavender, which was in some of my commercial products, but it also had all sorts of other ingredients that were considered good for your skin in my original world. The most standout of these was frankincense, a resin incense that had been considered precious since ancient times. You could extract oils from the resin just like you could with lavender.

The tree from which you got frankincense was susceptible to the cold, so it didn’t grow naturally in Salutania. However, I had happened to notice that tree several months ago in the palace’s greenhouse. Since finding it there, I had asked the palace to let me use its resin. But I obviously couldn’t use trees from the palace greenhouse for products I intended to sell. There weren’t enough trees to manufacture a meaningful amount of cream either.

I’d also added some herbs that were used as ingredients in superior-grade HP potions. I figured they might be good for revitalizing skin. I summed all this up by calling them “special ingredients,” but I suddenly worried that Zara might

think I'd added something kinda weird to the recipe.

"Oh! Of course, I didn't add anything that would be detrimental to your skin," I assured her. "I tested it myself before I gave it to you too."

"I know you wouldn't. I tried it on my arm first to make sure I didn't have any reactions, just like you told me to." Zara nodded.

Whew, what a relief.

Just like I had instructed her to do, I had tested the cream on myself first. This was called a patch test; you smeared a bit on the inner part of your arm and let it sit for a little while to make sure your skin didn't tingle or turn red.

I had warned Zara to do the same on her skin, because everyone's complexion is different, and that she should do it on a part of her body where people wouldn't notice. She had done just as I asked.

"You must have used precious ingredients, then. To think I received such a gift..." Zara had interpreted "special ingredients" as meaning "precious," and her expression clouded with guilt.

It's not your fault, Zara. It's mine! I had been having so much fun while I made the cream that I went a bit overboard with the extra ingredients. I really hoped she wouldn't overthink it. "I wouldn't say that. They're more ingredients you don't usually see used. Don't worry about it."

Hearing this made Zara smile at me with a powerful emotion in her eyes. That expression was...kind of familiar.

Oh, I know what it is. It's the same look that the Knights of the Second Order wear. Why is Zara looking at me with that same kind of reverence? Did the cream I gave her work that well? I didn't think it was that effective when I tried it on myself, but maybe it actually is?

I got a bit of a bad feeling as I squirmed under Zara's gaze.

Thankfully, someone came to my rescue as he called out, "Excuse me."

"Oh, Paul! Good morning."

"Good morning."

Paul was the head gardener; he had hired the other gardeners at the annex. He was in the prime of his life and had dark-brown hair and eyes, as did many Salutanian people. However, his eyes were sharp, and he had a solid build, so he was one of those folks who gave off an oddly intimidating air even when they were silent. He was a man of few words, which only served to intensify that impression.

Paul rarely spoke to me, so I assumed he had some business he wished to discuss. I swiveled to face him, and it turned out that he wanted to ask me about taking care of some herbs. I figured that it would be easier to show him than to explain, so we decided to head over to the herb plots together.

We happened to be heading in the same direction as the magistrate's hall, so Zara accompanied us as she went to return to her own duties. She was walking behind Paul and me, which was when I realized that Paul seemed to be acting kind of strangely. He was dragging his left leg a bit.

Does he always walk that way? I was a bit curious, so I glanced at him. "Say, Paul?"

Paul stopped to look at me. "Yes?"

"Did you hurt your foot?" I asked as I nodded toward it.

"Yes," he replied. "It's an old injury."

It had happened a long time again and was pretty much healed, but sometimes it hurt when the weather turned foul. I looked up at the sky, and indeed, it was overcast.

I see. So we'll have some rain or something. But it's an old injury, is it? It must bother him when it hurts just because it gets cloudy. And it's not like that'll go away someday. Wouldn't it be better to heal it, if possible?

Luckily for Paul, I was highly proficient with Healing Magic. I could easily take care of even old injuries that hadn't fully healed on their own. Furthermore, unlike my potion-brewing and cooking skills, this wasn't a secret. There would likely be a bit of an uproar if I offered to heal any and everyone, but Paul had done a lot for us with the annex garden. I had a feeling it would be okay to help him out—he was a colleague. I had similarly healed my coworkers at the

institute when necessary, after all.

Yeah. Okay. I'll do it! I had made up my mind, so all there was left to do was take action. I faced Paul right away. "May I heal you?"

We heard a, "Huh?" from a surprised Zara, who had been listening to our conversation. It was no surprise that she was taken aback, since ordinarily potions and Healing Magic couldn't do anything about old injuries. Or perhaps she didn't know that I could also cast healing spells.

Just in case, I clarified, "I'm very proficient in Healing Magic."

"I thought old injuries were impervious to that."

Healing Magic was tied to one's skill with Holy Magic. It was said that Level 10 was typically the limit, but my skill level was the absurd "Level ∞ ," so I usually coasted by simply claiming that I was especially skilled. However, I didn't know if everyone who was good with Holy Magic could actually help with scars and the like, so it was awkward to have that pointed out.

Zara was peering at me with a dubious expression, so I merely nodded at her to try and dodge any more questions before looking to Paul again.

Paul's expression had remained unchanged during our exchange, as if it had nothing to do with him. Nevertheless, he replied, "Please do."

So, I went ahead and cast Heal on him.

The ever-expressionless Paul's eyes widened slightly the second after I cast the spell. After the light of magic abated, Paul tested the effectiveness of my spell by stomping on the ground.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"It...doesn't hurt anymore."

"Please let me know if it flares up. I'll cast the spell again."

I was pretty sure Paul was fully healed now, but follow-ups are important!

"Thank you. I shall." Paul bowed deeply to me.

It wasn't until much later that I learned the effects of the cream I had given Zara were, in short, miraculous—and that my number of devotees had secretly

increased.

Behind the Scenes I

EVEN AFTER SEI returned from Hawke's Domain, the members of the Special Service continued to search the lands for black swamps and monsters. The king finished reading one of their regular reports in his office and sighed like he had just completed a difficult task.

"So that was the last, then," the king murmured as if to himself.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the prime minister replied. He had been the one to deliver the report. "I believe we can say with confidence that monsters are spawning at normal rates across the kingdom."

They hadn't found anything new since the discovery of the black swamps in Hawke's Domain. They had also received reports from every territory that the monster population had fallen to a manageable level for the local soldiers. The king had just read a letter attesting to that from the final territory on his list.

From the assembled reports, the king and prime minister concluded that the miasma crisis had been resolved.

"It felt long, but it was short, wasn't it?" the king said, full of emotion.

"All thanks to Lady Sei," the prime minister said, naming the one to whom they owed it all.

"Indeed."

They both thought of Sei at that moment: the woman from another world whom they had been forced to summon using the Saint Summoning Ritual when the Saint failed to appear, despite the density of the miasma. Even though the crown prince had slighted Sei immediately after her summoning, she had accepted the king's request to travel the country and dispel the miasma against which they were helpless without her.

Moreover, Sei's abilities went far beyond purifying the miasma, the gift which had been written of in books. She was developing potions even more effective than the ones the kingdom had previously possessed, had discovered the

effects the Cooking skill could bestow, devised powerful enchantments, and healed patients in critical condition. In addition to the powers of the Saint, which had been hidden since time immemorial, she had displayed powers beyond their wildest dreams in a variety of fields, as well as used the knowledge she had brought from her original world to promote their kingdom's development.

"We have many things we must consider, but first, we must reward her."

The prime minister furrowed his brow. "That problem will be difficult to resolve."

The king smiled tiredly. "Indeed. She hardly has any wants to speak of."

Sei had saved their kingdom. They had rewarded her for slaying monsters as well as given her a salary for her work at the institute, but it wasn't nearly enough, considering all she had achieved. They had to keep up appearances in front of the nobility, so as the king, he had a duty to reward her even further. However, Sei was free of avarice, which presented a riddle.

As the king, he wanted to grant the brilliant Sei a title and land to bind her to their kingdom, and he would have done so even if she weren't the Saint. But Sei wasn't enticed by such rewards, whereas generally people would have been delighted. In fact, she abhorred the very idea.

The only things Sei had desired thus far were intangible, such as the classes from teachers at the palace and the right to browse the Forbidden Depository. The bedrooms and dining hall built at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora at Sei's request were part of a national facility and thus couldn't be counted as personal favors. The only other thing she'd received was the money she needed to live.

They certainly didn't want to offer anything that Sei disliked, but they were utterly stumped, as they also had to consider the interests of the nation—they couldn't just do nothing. Ultimately, they decided to interrogate someone who knew Sei much better than they did: Johan, the head researcher at the institute, who had cooperated with them previously.

Johan readily stopped their offer in its tracks before they could even really ask—as expected. They started by bringing up the topic of rewarding Sei for

purifying the kingdom, at which Johan sank into thought. They hoped they could ask him what kind of reward she would like after that, but they stumbled at the very first step.

“That *is* a difficult question,” he said.

The prime minister didn’t miss a beat as he said, “Is it? We were thinking of granting her the title of duchess.”

Sei might have been a commoner in the world she came from, but she was of a rank on par with the king in this one. They had thus been preparing to give her the rank of duchess, which was only offered to those of the royal bloodline.

Johan hesitated before he said, “While I find that to be an offer of unprecedented magnanimity, I believe she would not accept.”

Johan’s cheek also twitched. Surely he could sense the king and prime minister’s hopefulness. However, he respected Sei’s wishes and managed to reject the suggestion, even though it came from the two most powerful people in Salutania.

“What about a domain?” Though the prime minister knew it was a long shot, he had to try.

Johan did not nod. “That goes for a domain too.”

There was an awkward silence in the room before the king said, resigned, “So she truly desires neither.”

“Indeed she doesn’t. I’ve tried to indirectly ask her if she would accept, but she always responds with disinterest.”

“I see.”

They had all known this day would come, a day when the kingdom had been near-completely purified and they would have to discuss a reward. Johan had taken it upon himself to test Sei’s feelings before they even summoned him.

Johan often hid in his older brother Lorant’s shadow, but he was a highly competent fellow. While he had distanced himself from political machinations, he had the talent to be named head of an institute and worked to maintain a political balance from his position. It could have been said that he was

discerning when it came to subtleties. He was good at staying one step ahead of a situation and focused on even the finest details. This time, he had put that special skill on full display.

The palace couldn't offer other people rewards when they hadn't properly done so for the person who had played the largest role in a great work. As things stood, the crown couldn't rightly recognize the knights and the mages who had played a part until they acknowledged the Saint.

What was the consequence of this? In short, they *had* to get Sei to accept a reward, even if she didn't particularly care to have one.

Just as the prime minister was on the verge of trying to persuade Johan, Johan beat him to the punch. "Your Excellency."

"Yes?"

"I hate to make a request at this juncture, but there's something with which I would like to beg your assistance."

The prime minister gave him a tight smile and urged Johan to continue with a look.

That was when Johan brought up the expansion of the institute's herb garden. "I made this request once before, but at the time, it could not be granted. We've been getting by as best we can, but the number of herbs grown by the institute has increased, and we're just about at our limit."

"So you wish to make your request again."

"Yes."

The prime minister put a hand to his chin as he pondered. At face value, it sounded like Johan was begging the prime minister for support for a request that had been denied once before. However, both he and the king inferred that there was more to Johan's choice to bring the topic back up. Johan made it sound like he it was an incidental subject change, but he had his reasons. They suspected, based on how the conversation had been proceeding, that Johan was alluding to a solution to the riddle of Sei's reward.

"What was our reason for rejecting the proposal last time?" the prime

minister asked Johan as he thought this over.

“You said there was a lack of available land.”

“Hmm...”

Upon hearing this, the king said, “What if we assigned you a place outside the palace grounds?”

“For a garden?”

“Yes. Landerrouet is close to the capital. It would be a good spot.”

Landerrouet was one of the holdings owned by the royal family. It was close to the capital, had a mild climate, and was generally a good place to live. It was also a region that primarily produced grain due to relatively fertile soil, which was why the king proposed it as the site for a new herb garden.

Johan likely knew all this from the name alone, due to his line of work. He covered his mouth with his fist as he nodded. “That’s a superb location.”

The king glanced at the prime minister, who nodded and said, “That sounds like a splendid idea to me. The local magistrate’s estate already has a spacious garden. I believe it could be possible to appropriate part of the estate for an annex.”

“Indeed. Outsiders frequently visit the palace. If we establish an annex there, we could also transfer classified projects to those grounds.”

Johan understood what the king was implying, and he looked up from his lap. He met the gaze of the king, then the prime minister, and sensed that they were waiting for him to speak. “Are you referring to the herbs Sei is growing?”

These herbs were the ones that required a field blessed by the Saint’s magic in order to thrive. Johan had instantly inferred what the king was getting at because knowledge of the Saint’s additional powers was kept as much of a secret as possible, so they always spoke around it.

“Yes.” The king nodded with satisfaction before voicing his own thoughts, “To tell the truth, I’ve been considering raising security measures for the institute for some time now.”

The way he said it told Johan everything he needed to know. “Does that

include the garden as well?”

“Naturally.”

The king had indeed been mulling over an increase to the security of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora for a good long while. They had already taken numerous measures to ensure Sei’s safety once she joined the institute, but he had begun to feel like they needed even more protections for the things that Sei did and created. Essentially, she had a tendency to fully display her abilities as the Saint, and many of the things she created had unthinkable—and obvious—effects.

It would have been best if they could get Sei to stop using all her abilities, except the ones related to purification, so that the full breadth of her power didn’t become public knowledge. However, Sei enjoyed her research, so they were hesitant to put such restrictions on her. Not to mention the things she devised were extremely profitable, so the king couldn’t help thinking it would be a true loss to make her stop.

Now this talk of the garden made him remember these issues that he had put in the back of his mind to handle at a later point. In the king’s eyes, Johan’s request to expand the garden was a perfect opportunity.

“We recently received seeds from Zaidera. There are also other plants being grown using the Saint’s power, correct? I would like to take this chance to transfer all the most valuable projects, as well as those that must be kept a secret, to the annex’s management.”

“Even the plants we’re currently cultivating?”

“If possible.”

“Very well. However, I believe the apple tree would be difficult to move. Could that remain in the greenhouse?”

“I suppose there’s no helping the tree. We shall look after it, then.”

“Thank you.”

“While this would put you in the position of holding two posts, I would like to place you in charge of the annex as well.”

Johan stared at the king in amazement. Normally a single person couldn't simultaneously hold two such positions. He asked, looking puzzled, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. You are the one most qualified candidate," the king responded. "Furthermore, if she so desires it, I would like to make this annex a research facility for Sei's exclusive use."

"Oh?"

The king had come up with this idea in hopes of decreasing the risk of revealing the Saint's abilities while allowing Sei to continue with her research. However, Sei tended to like working with others. It was plain to see in the way she regularly engaged with the other researchers and their projects. Discussing things with her peers helped her to develop her own ideas, and she enjoyed pursuing her work alongside her fellow investigators.

The king had put this idea on hold because it was unclear whether Sei would like an independent research facility for her own work. The king believed he could use this annex as an avenue to propose the venture. If Sei so desired it, the annex would become hers. If she didn't, then they would continue to use it as merely an annex. Either way, they could strengthen security while allowing Sei to continue her work unimpeded, and they could be more flexible in indulging her future impulses.

The king's other aim was to use the annex as a cushion that would soften the blow when they did eventually offer Sei a research facility for her private use. It might lower the mental hurdles between her and accepting such a gift.

"In other words, this might not be a permanent position," he said to Johan. "If we awarded it to someone new, she might refuse the position when we tried to offer it to her."

"That is highly possible."

"But if we assign the position to you, I don't foresee a need to worry. Besides, you know the job well, and you also understand *her*. Therefore I must ask for your cooperation. If you agree to hold both positions, then we will prepare additional recompense for your new position as head of the annex."

The king's eloquent praise made Johan nervous. He understood that the king was saying these things to convince him to take the position, but he couldn't help the vague discomfort that came with hearing lavish praise from the most powerful man in the land.

Johan cleared his throat to master his feelings and bowed reverently to the king. "Very well. I shall accept your offer and assume the role of annex supervisor."

"My thanks. We'll return to the matter with further details at a later date."

With that, Johan had accepted the position, just as the king had hoped. They saw Johan off, and after the door to the office was shut, the king and prime minister quietly continued their conversation.

"An annex in Landerrouet," the prime minister said thoughtfully.

"I thought it was a good idea."

"I do as well, especially since everyone there is well equipped to keep a secret."

"And now we have one less thing to worry about."

"I don't think this settles the problem of Sei's reward, however."

"Those in the know will understand that the annex is a necessary step before the next reward. As for those less savvy to such things, we'll also award her a monetary bonus so they can have the evidence they're looking for."

"Very well. I shall make the arrangements."

Landerrouet, known for the secret-keeping skill of its people, was a special holding that only a select few knew about.

While Landerrouet, the place where they were going to establish the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora's annex, was a holding owned by the royal family, it wasn't large enough to be called "vast." The royal family's estate there was on the same scale as the magistrate's. It was smaller than their other holdings and staffed by few servants. However, it was a special holding, and an important one. Testament to that fact lay in that terribly few people in the

Kingdom of Salutania knew the role Landerrouet actually played.

For generations now, the magistrate's estate had employed retirees of a very specific profession. That had not changed. Starting with the magistrate and going on down the staff list, every single person employed at the magistrate's hall was a former spy who had worked directly for the royal family. Although they had stepped down from active duty, everyone at the estate was tight-lipped and was trained in self-defense. It was far easier to prevent information leaks at a place like that than at the palace.

If they added a few active duty personnel as well as some additional security measures in the building, then it would instantly become a suitable place for Sei to freely pursue her research.

Having come to that conclusion, the king decided to turn part of the magistrate's hall into the new annex.

Zara, who was employed as the magistrate's secretary, was one of the spies who had been hired when the annex was opened. She had been deployed all across the kingdom before this posting and had gathered information from every location. Now she played the role of magistrate's assistant and the Saint's confidante.

As a girl who had been raised in an orphanage, she was filled with awe when she was selected to serve as confidante for the Saint—a woman who was of the same standing as the king. But Sei was very much unlike how Zara had imagined she would be when she first accepted the job. In manner, Sei was somewhere between a noble and a commoner, and she was exceptionally easy to get along with.

Thanks to Sei's personality, they became acquaintances in practically no time at all and managed to build an amiable relationship. That was probably why Sei had given her that cosmetic cream as a present during one of their tea parties.

Zara already habitually used the cosmetics that Sei's company sold, so she was familiar with both the appearance and benefits of the products. The cream Sei had given her looked just like the kind she was already using. Therefore, she assumed it was exactly the same.

Right after Zara said goodbye to Sei that day, she went to the kitchen of the magistrate's hall.

"May," she called from the door.

A woman sitting in a chair near the backdoor turned to her. "Yes, Sister?"

May was a maid who worked in the kitchen. Her hair went past her shoulders and was tied back, and the bangs on the left side of her face went past her chin. Although she called Zara her sister, they weren't related by blood. The two women had come from the same orphanage. The moment May had arrived there, Zara had told her to call her "sister" because they had the same eye color. May had done so ever since. Having grown up in this way, the women were extremely close.

May held a knife in her right hand and the potato she was in the middle of peeling in her left. At her feet were two buckets full of more potatoes. She was in the middle of preparing dinner.

"Here, why don't you use this?" Zara asked.

"Cosmetics? Why are you giving this to me?"

"The Lady Saint offered it to me today."

"The Lady Saint? Oh, so she came by again."

May pictured the black-haired woman in her mind. Sei came to the estate frequently these days to stop by the annex of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. Unlike Zara, May never had the opportunity to speak with her, in large part due to the difference in their social rank. Thus, May had only ever seen her from afar.

"No need," May said to Zara. "That sort of thing is wasted on me."

"Weren't you just saying how stiff and itchy your face feels because it's been so dry? The cream might alleviate the irritation a bit."

May was a woman as well; it wasn't like she had no interest in beauty products. The reason she declared the cream was better off in Zara's hands was the left half of her face, which was splotted with burn scars.

The orphanage where Zara and May had grown up had close ties with the

royal family. Its more talented children were selected to work for the palace. Both women had been determined to develop their potential and had begun training to be spies when they were seven years old.

They had started with reading, writing, and basic arithmetic and had gone on to learn all manner of things, from martial arts and swordsmanship, to ways of eking information out of people through idle conversation, and more. Then, when they became adults at age fifteen, they had taken up formal spywork for the Special Service.

Several years later, they were coincidentally assigned to the same mission. Their task was to ascertain where monsters were spawning in a certain region. They were searching a forest when it happened: a type of monster that had never before spawned in that area suddenly manifested.

It resembled a lizard the size of a small dog. A toxic membrane covered the surface of its body; touching it burned the skin raw. It snuck up on them quietly and dropped down from above to attack Zara. May barely managed to notice in time. She immediately threw herself onto Zara to protect her, but the toxins on the monster's body splashed her face.

After the women defeated the monster, they used a potion right away, but unfortunately, the burn scars remained.

The monster's toxins were powerful, and to this day, Zara regretted how her incompetence had led to May's scars. Zara apologized time after time, but May merely laughed and brushed it off. Then, one day, May grew frustrated and told Zara to cut it out with the apologies; it took her some time to realize that Zara had stopped mentioning the incident or her scars. It was nevertheless apparent that Zara was merely holding her tongue. May was always first in her thoughts. As such, when Sei gave Zara the cream, Zara had immediately thought of how May had mentioned her dry skin and decided to give it to her.

"But this is a present for you. I can't take it," May refused. It would be rude for someone else to use a gift from a noble.

But Zara was insistent. "Then how about we split it? Is that all right with you?"

May frowned. Although Zara didn't say it out loud, May had known Zara for a long time, and she knew the depths of Zara's remorse. Even if May continued to

object, Zara wouldn't give up. Even if Zara did yield, that wouldn't erase her regrets.

Perhaps accepting half the cream will lessen her sense of guilt? I've heard that the Saint is an openhearted woman. She likely won't rebuke Zara if I use it as well. With those thoughts, May gave up on refusing and accepted the cream with an awkward smile.

Zara was the first to notice the effects of Sei's cream. The morning after May first used it, Zara happened to catch a glimpse of May's cheek through her hair—the burn scars looked like they had faded. Zara assumed this was wishful thinking, but she continued to stare at May's face without realizing what she was doing.

"Good morning," May greeted her, though she sensed something amiss. "Sister?"

"Sorry, do you mind?" Zara's expression remained odd as she reached for May's bangs. Brushing back the hair, she revealed May's face.

It was no longer marred by scars. Instead, beneath May's hair there lay a stretch of smooth, perfect skin.

"They're gone," Zara murmured as she stared in wonder.

"What are?"

"Your scars... They're gone..."

"What?" May knew instantly that Zara was talking about her face, but she couldn't believe it. She blinked at Zara. Once she let Zara's words sink in, she ran to the mirror to check her reflection. "This can't be."

Now it was May's turn to stare in astonishment at her appearance. She ran her fingers along the skin where the scars should have been, unable to accept what she saw in the mirror. Just as her reflection suggested, she felt none of the bumps she had grown accustomed to.



As May stood fixated on her reflection, Zara asked with surprise, “You didn’t notice?”

“I haven’t looked in a mirror in a while.”

Ever since her face had been burned, May had hardly ever looked at her own reflection. Although she had put on a brave front for Zara, her appearance had upset her. Her hands had remembered what to do, though, so she had been able to take care of her everyday grooming needs without a mirror. As such, she’d tried to never look into one unless it was absolutely necessary. Consequently, she hadn’t realized the scars were gone until Zara pointed it out.

“I’m so happy for you,” Zara said quietly, her words coming from the bottom of her heart. Teardrops welled up along with them.

May began to cry translucent tears as well.

Zara hugged May from behind, and May put her hand on Zara’s arm. The women smiled as they wept in front of the mirror.

Act 4:

Going to the Theater

AFTER I STOPPED HAULING myself around to different parts of the kingdom on expeditions, my carefree days continued for a time. The only things I had to take care of were my work for the institute and my classes at the palace.

Then there came a day unlike the others, in which it felt as if someone had tossed a small stone into the calm waters of my life.

It happened on the day I took magic lessons at the palace. Normally, I had a classroom lecture in the morning followed by practical lessons in the afternoon, but that day I only had the lecture because Grand Magus Yuri Drewes, who was my teacher, had business to attend to later.

Yuri was utterly obsessed with magic, and because he got to observe the Saint using her special power during my practical lessons, it would have been no exaggeration to say that he saw them as a treat. As such, I was pretty surprised when he said those lessons were canceled for the day.

On the other hand, the obligation he had to deal with instead was apparently related to monster slaying, so he probably saw that as a treat as well.

“Right then, thus concludes our class for today,” Yuri announced as we reached a good break.

The day’s lecture was one that Royal Academy second-years learned at the end of that year.

I sure have powered through the course content, I thought as I expressed my usual gratitude to Yuri. “Okay. Thank you as ever.”

I was gathering my textbook and other things from my desk to ready myself to return to the institute when Yuri surprised the pants off of me—he brought up a topic other than magic. “Have you ever been to a play?”

“A play?” I was taken aback for a moment. *A play? As in a theater play?* It took a moment to finally comprehend what he had asked me. “You mean like,

as in the kind performed on stage?”

Yuri smiled. “Yes. One that incorporates singing as well.”

I never would have associated that kind of thing with Yuri, but it was indeed what he was talking about. What in the world was going on with him? “Stage performances, huh? Yes, I went to one once, back in my old world.”

“Really? You’re interested in them, then?”

Theater and so forth? I wasn’t so sure if I *did* have an interest. I had only been to one because a friend had invited me. So I hesitated as I replied, “I suppose? I wouldn’t say that I’m *not* interested.”

Yuri paid my hesitation no heed as he went on smoothly. “Excellent. Would you like to accompany me to one?”

Okay, so this was an *invitation*. And it wasn’t for magic drills. Nor to slay monsters. But to go to the theater. I was so shocked, I wound up blurting out, “I beg your pardon?”

Nevertheless, Yuri didn’t let my astonishment bother him as he eloquently explained, “A few days ago, I received tickets for a play that will be performed in the capital. It occurred to me that you might be interested in joining me.”

“Oh...?”

When Yuri coughed up further details, I learned that House Drewes had been a patron for this performance. The tickets were an expression of gratitude. By all rights, the head of the family or his heir should have used them, but they had prior engagements and were unable to attend. That was how they’d ended up in Yuri’s lap.

There were two tickets, which had been meant for a man of House Drewes and his wife. Moreover, Yuri wasn’t allowed to go by himself even if he couldn’t find someone to take with him. This performance was already popular, and his family had forbidden him from letting the tickets go to waste. At first Yuri figured that he could just go with someone else in his family, but unfortunately, everyone was booked. After mulling over his alternatives, he had settled on me.

Now the question was what I ought to do.

All the letters inviting me to tea parties and balls had to be sent through the palace. I felt like an invitation to go to the theater fell in the same category, but Yuri *was* the grand magus. Then again, if he'd just been some stranger, I would have told him to send the invitation through the palace without a second thought.

"Please, Lady Sei," Yuri said to my hesitation. "If I ask anyone else, I expect I'll land myself in a bit of a conundrum."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, I simply don't know what kinds of things one ought to talk about with women."

Did Yuri mean things like fashion and pastries? If so, I could see how he felt out of the loop, what with his sole interest being matters of the arcane and all. As he said that, a wry smile on his face, I understood why he considered himself to be in a bind.

I was indebted to Yuri for teaching me everything I knew about magic, so I was willing to go the extra mile to help when he was in trouble. Seeing a play would be no big deal, right? Although I wasn't particularly interested, I was curious to see what theater was like in this world—so much so that I was increasingly tempted to go. Moreover, the ticket was free.

"Okay. I'll go with you."

The most breathtaking smile spread across Yuri's face. "Thank you!"

With that, he gave me the important details, such as where we would be going and the date and time. We said our goodbyes and several days passed before it came up again.

Later, as I was speaking with Johan at the institute, I suddenly remembered a question I'd failed to ask Yuri: What kind of clothes did one wear when going to a play?

"Ah, I'm going to the theater in the city during my next day off," I clarified. "So I was wondering what I should wear."

Johan immediately began to interrogate me. “You are? With whom?”

He sounds like my dad, asking who I’m hanging out with like that, I thought.
“Lord Drewes.”

Johan’s brow knit. “And when you did you agree to this?”

“During his last lecture.”

“So he asked you directly?”

“Yes. He said that his family couldn’t go and that they had extra tickets.”

“Ooh...” Johan put a hand on his forehead and lifted his head up.

Huh? Did I do something bad? A panicky feeling started to rise within me, and for some reason I became anxious.

When Johan recovered himself, he gave me an explanation with a thoroughly strange expression.

There were several theaters in the capital, but nobles and commoners patronized separate venues. If House Drewes was planning to attend one, it was likely the sort reserved for the nobility. Johan guessed which theater I was going to, and it turned out to be exactly the one Yuri had named.

Johan is so knowledgeable about this kind of thing. I can always count on him.

In other words, since I was going to a theater for the nobility, there was a dress code. Yup. I was going to have to wear a fancy gown.

“If I’m going to have to get dolled up, then I suppose I should ask the palace maids for help.”

“Indeed. I don’t know that much about women’s garments. I’m sure they’ll be much more help on that front.”

“Yeah. And if I’m going to have to wear one of those dresses...”

“Even though the performance is in the evening, you’ll have to get ready before the sun sets.”

“Yeah...”

Oof. I suspected as much. Will I have to start getting ready first thing in the

morning like I have to for Lady's Day etiquette lessons at the palace? Even if I'll be going with the grand magus, I have a feeling they'll approach it like they would a real social event rather than some lesson. I laughed weakly at the thought of what was to come.

At any rate, I would have to consult with the maids first. I had a feeling I would have to submit myself to their expertise at the crack of dawn, but maybe it would be possible to start in the afternoon instead.

With this sliver of hope, I sent a message to the palace right away.

On the day of the play, I stepped onto the battlefield just before noon, as I had predicted. Mary's kindness allowed me to start later versus first thing in the morning, like I would have for a usual Lady's Day. Nevertheless, the maids were even more fired up than usual. Probably that was on account of how I would be standing beside Yuri, whose beauty was unparalleled.

"Hello, Lady Sei."

"Uh, hello."

Yuri looked unspeakably lovely when he came to the palace at the appointed time to pick me up. The combination of him being, you know, *himself* but also dressed in formalwear like he'd worn at that ball ages ago made him seem radiant and, um, sparkly? It made my voice come out as a squeak.

They said that wearing a suit made a person thirty percent more handsome, and I had a feeling that his outfit had a similar mathematical effect.

Yuri wore a black justaucorps and culottes with a madder-red vest, and his garments were all made of velour. The justaucorps had a gorgeous, embroidered border of many colors, though mainly gold. The front of the vest was also finely embroidered with a pattern that looked like snowflakes. Both items were extremely luxuriant.

I suppose you wouldn't expect the son of a marquis to wear anything less.

Meanwhile, my dark-red gown was also made of velour, and my long black gloves were silk. The hem of the dress sported sumptuous golden embroidery

with a black lace border. The gown's color had been picked because it matched my hair color, but I'd wound up matching Yuri's outfit as well.

As I was overwhelmed by the shock of coincidence, Yuri leaned in and smoothly took my right hand. I was distracted by the gloves he wore as he placed a kiss on the back of my hand.

"You look most striking today, Lady Sei." He maintained that pose as he glanced up at me. There was a strange intensity in his smiling eyes. It was incredibly alluring.



H-his attack! It's too powerful! My internal scream couldn't be contained and leaked out, to my dismay. "Huh?! Wh-what are you doing?!"

I yanked my hand back, and Yuri chuckled with amusement. "Oh? Did I offend you?"

He's making fun of me, isn't he?

I took a deep breath and let it out before once again demanding why he'd done that. He claimed his family had ordered him to, and furthermore that it was just good manners when escorting a lady.

Hey, Yuri's family! What do you think you're teaching him?! I can take it because I know how he is normally, but I bet I would have fainted if I didn't! I couldn't voice these thoughts out loud, so mentally lambasting House Drewes would have to do. "It's not that I'm *offended*..." I sighed. "Just forget it. Let's go."

"Very well, then."

I was already thoroughly exhausted, and we hadn't even left. Yuri seemed satisfied. He didn't say anything further when I suggested we ought to go.

The theater we were headed to was in the district where most of the noble estates were located in the city. As you'd expect from a theater for nobility, the exterior was both exquisitely beautiful and exquisitely expensive, with stone pillars carved with all kinds of different designs out front.

My maids had told me about it as they helped me get dressed, and according to them, the carvings on these pillars were inspired by scenes from a certain story. In front of each pillar there was a woven iron fire pit, and the shadows of the flames made the carved scenes look like they were moving.

The entrance to the theater lay beyond these pillars. As we passed in the carriage, we saw elegantly dressed people passing through them, one after another.

There was a stairway in front of the pillars, so many carriages were lined on the road in front of the stairs. It looked like there was a bit of a traffic jam; we would have to wait our turn to get out. I craned my neck, trying to see the end

of the line, but the carriage passed the front without stopping.

“Wasn’t that the entrance?” I asked, thinking it strange that we weren’t slowing down.

I felt Yuri lean closer to me. I got the sense that he was looking out the window over my shoulder. Then I felt his faint warmth on my left shoulder as he spoke from that intimate distance. “Yes, it was. However, there’s a separate entrance for patrons, so we’ll be entering from there.”

I was just a bit frozen. After Yuri’s behavior when he first showed up to pick me up, I couldn’t help but notice every little thing he did today. Even though the person doing these things was Yuri, who may I reiterate had no interest in anything but magic, I was strangely hyper-aware of everything he did.

It’s just because we’re in this cramped carriage. Calm down, me! I tried to soothe myself as I felt him lean back away.

Relieved that reality had reinstated itself, I turned my attention to what Yuri had said. So the general public went through the front entrance while patrons had their own, huh? It made me wonder if the royal family had their own entrance as well. When I asked, Yuri confirmed that this was the case. The carriage would be able to go right to the door of our stop, just as it would for the royals. The whole thing felt like a pretty big deal.

As we chatted, we arrived at the patrons’ entrance. I followed Yuri out of the carriage and took his hand to step down, though the process felt distinctly different from usual. I mulled it over and concluded that it was probably because Yuri had never before escorted me in this fashion.

Yuri led me inside while I was lost in thought. Just as he had told me in the carriage, it was only a few steps from the carriage to the building. It felt like I was stepping into an entirely different world.

The interior of the theater was even more dazzling than the exterior. I found myself wholly captivated. The first things that caught my eye were the enormous chandeliers at both ends of the hallway. The mounted glass shards sparkled as they reflected the light. There were no candles because they used enchanted foci as a light source, just like they did in the palace.

I wouldn't have expected anything less from a theater catering to nobility. The place felt super high-class, and not just because of the resplendent chandeliers.

The pillars rising from the floor to the ceiling were inlaid with gold leaves, and they shone with the light they reflected from the chandeliers. The top and bottom of the pillars were carved with intricately fine details that I couldn't quite make out. Plain vertical lines were carved into the middle sections, and they cast shadows as well.

The ceiling was a bright mural of men and women together. Perhaps it was a scene from a story as well? Unfortunately, I wasn't very well versed in the stories of this world, so I had no idea what tale it was alluding to.

I had gradually slowed down as I stared up at the ceiling, so I felt Yuri tug on my arm, which was linked with his. I looked to him, and he stopped to turn to me. He tilted his head as he asked, "Is something the matter?"

I shook my head; I was just reeling over our surroundings. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was just struck by the opulence."

Yuri nodded in agreement. "That's just the word. I hear the front entrance is equally magnificent."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. Would you like to pass that way when we leave?"

I had assumed this entrance was extra fancy because it was for patrons, but apparently it was like this all over. Perhaps it was all to lend to that extraordinary air characteristic of all theaters? At any rate, his suggestion was tempting, as I'd be able to see something new *and* see something fancy.

But would we be making trouble for the person picking us by leaving through a different door? I'd hate to do that, if so...but I couldn't resist my curiosity.

"Would that be all right?" I asked.

"I certainly don't mind; I've never seen it myself either."

"Thank you!"

With that decided, Yuri resumed walking. As he was my escort, I followed along.

We soon arrived at what I had to assume was the door to the seats on the second floor. We had passed numerous similar doors along the way, and there were men who looked like attendants waiting beside each one. Women who looked like maids accompanied well-dressed people down the hallways—presumably fellow spectators.

Might these seats actually be... A bad feeling grew in my chest as I started to put together the clues and stepped through the doors with Yuri.

There was a small room on the other side. Along the wall on our immediate right was a waist-high cabinet, above which hung a mirror. Both the cabinet and mirror were splendidly decorated; the cabinet's cabriole legs were especially cute. The room was darker than the hallway, so I couldn't see well, but the parts that were illuminated had an awfully pretty amber hue. It lent a superbly sophisticated atmosphere.

Opposite the door were two chairs that also sported cabriole legs; they were facing what would have been a fourth wall. However, there wasn't a wall but what looked like another small room directly across from us.

I focused on studying the furniture as a way to escape reality, but that didn't change the truth of what was going on: This suite was just what I had feared.

But even though I knew what sort of room we were in by appearance alone, and it wasn't like the situation would magically change even if Yuri denied it, I wound up asking anyway: "Are these box seats?"

"Yes. Supposedly House Drewes only ever watches from a box," Yuri answered. His tone wasn't exactly begrudging in any way, yet his words felt somehow stiff. Maybe it was because he had never come to watch, seeing as he had no interest in theater.

"Ah. I see."

Box seats were essentially a private suite. There were only two seats in there at present, but the space could probably have sat another two to three people. The chairs were wider than the ones on the first floor in front of the stage, and considering the elaborate nature of the furniture, I had a feeling that these

tickets must have cost a whole heck of a lot.

I was impressed that Yuri's family exclusively attended the theater in an opera box, but when I thought about it, Yuri *was* the son of a marquis. House Drewes were high-ranking nobles and a powerful house; many of their ancestors had served as grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly. It made sense that they would be able to reserve this kind of luxury.

"Please, have a seat." A servant pulled out a chair for me.

"Thank you," I said as I took it.

After I settled in, I looked ahead. People dressed in sparkling garments entered the boxes directly across from us.

Hmm. I had figured as much as we arrived, but this really was the second floor. The position of the box across from us confirmed it.

The box seats had been built to surround the first-floor seats in front of the stage, as if they were the walls of the second and third floors. There also appeared to be seats on an additional floor above, but since I couldn't see divisions between rooms, maybe those were regular seats as well.

The box seats by the one directly across from us and near the stage had high ceilings. Maybe those were for royalty. I couldn't see them from here, but assuming the boxes were arranged symmetrically, there were likely similar seats on our side as well.

"Have you noticed something of interest?" Yuri asked as I gazed around.

I supposed you could say it was of interest to me, but really I was just drinking in the sights. "No, it's just new. I've never been to a theater like this."

"I see."

That was the truth too. I had never been to a classic European-style theater before. At most, I had seen pictures of old theaters located abroad.

I looked up to see that the ceiling was colorfully painted, just like the ceiling at the entrance. In the center hung a large chandelier. It didn't appear to have any candles either, so I figured it must also be using enchanted foci as light sources.

"The chandeliers are enchanted, aren't they?" I asked Yuri off-handedly.

He looked up at the ceiling and nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I thought you had to be near an enchantment to activate it. How do they work?”

The foci I sometimes enchanted at the Royal Magi Assembly were turned into accessories or embedded in weapons—something you could wear and then empower. The person wearing the enchanted item used their own magic to flip the switch, so to speak.

Thus I was wondering how the chandeliers worked. They could hardly be worn, and there was no one nearby to make them function. I had previously wondered this when I heard that the chandeliers in the palace used enchanted foci, and I figured now was the perfect opportunity to ask the grand magus himself.

“Things like these chandeliers follow different circuits.”

“What do you mean by that?”

As this was a question about magic, Yuri was about to launch into a thorough explanation, but unfortunately, our conversation was cut off as the lights dimmed and the hall went dark. The play was about to begin.

It was a love story about the twists and turns of a relationship between a noble and a commoner girl, from the moment he fell at first sight until their marriage. The girl had a guardian, but he was actually after her fortune and kicked up all kinds of problems by trying to marry her first.

It had sounded like a good story based on the summary. However, what had been described to me as a play turned out to be more like an opera, what with the way the songs and music were composed. Because I was even less familiar with operas than plays, everything the performers sang went in one ear and out the other; I had no idea what was going on. Maybe part of that was because of the lively banter in our vicinity.

I had thought that performances were to be watched in silence, but that didn’t seem to be how things were done in this world. Throughout the theater, people shouted at the actors while others ignored the performance altogether to talk amongst themselves. Because of that, my attention shifted to the

scenery on stage.

The scenery was no different from the sort I had seen back in Japan. The theater went dark between scenes, and they switched out the large paintings that served as backdrops and so forth. They even used real furniture in scenes set indoors.

If I had to say what was different, it was the monotony of the lighting. All they did was turn the lights on and off. They didn't change the brightness or the color.

"Can they *not* change it?" I unthinkingly murmured to myself.

"Change what?" Yuri asked.

I decided I might as well explain myself. "I was just wondering if the only thing they can do with the lights is turn them on and off."

"What else would you do with them?"

"Well, in my world, they could change the intensity and even the hue."

"Huh."

It appeared that Yuri was unable to focus on the play as well, and he quickly grew invested in this lighting discussion. They say that "seeing is believing," so I cast the Practical Magic spell Light below the waist-high wall. I didn't want anyone else to see.

At first, I cast it at the usual brightness. The second time, I adjusted it. I had done this back in Hawke's Domain, so I knew I could pull it off. Yuri's eyes sparkled as he gazed at the small glowing ball at the tip of my pointer finger. Then, with the third cast, I wished for the light to be blue, and this time an azure light appeared at my fingertip, just as I had imagined.

"*Incre—*"

"Shh! Not so loud!" I clapped my hands over Yuri's mouth as he was on the verge of shouting out in excitement. My warning had been quiet, so I hoped against hope that no one had noticed.

However, I felt the softness of his lips under my palm before I realized what I had done. My actions had clearly startled Yuri as well. His eyes were wide open.

Uhhh. I went pale as Yuri and I stared at one another for a time, unmoving.



But we couldn't stay like that forever. A cold sweat ran down my back as I at last removed my hands from Yuri's mouth.

"I'm sorry," I said weakly.

"It's all right. You surprised me a bit, but I'm fine." Yuri smiled and his tone sounded just as it usually did.

Phew. He's not mad.

I leaned in close and whispered so that we wouldn't bother anyone else as we continued our conversation.

I had no idea that the people in the box directly across from ours had seen the whole thing. I only learned about that a week after our evening at the theater.

Behind the Scenes II

A FEW DAYS after Sei joined Grand Magus Drewes to see a play, Johan, the head researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, heard a certain rumor. Johan distanced himself from high society, so the rumor had to be rather significant to reach his ears.

The rumor pertained to Sei. It said that Sei and Grand Magus Drewes had swiftly become intimate.

The rumor stemmed from the events that had occurred when Sei went to see a play in the capital a few days prior. Yuri had invited her, and they had become drawn into a conversation during the performance.

The people who saw them had begun to speculate wildly about their relationship. Those who heard the tale had embellished the story, and it had continued to spread as a rumor. The rumors varied a great deal, with some saying that the two were simply good friends, while others said it wouldn't be long before their engagement was announced. What all the rumors had in common was the claim that the Saint and the grand magus were very close indeed.

When these whispers reached Johan's ears, he thought, *I could have told you this would happen.*

Johan had predicted this rumor would pick up as soon as Sei told him that she was going to the theater with Yuri.

I thought it was odd that the marquis had given the tickets to Yuri of all people, Johan pondered as he filled out documents in his office.

When he heard the gossip being circulated in the corridors of the palace, he thought back to what Sei had said when she told him she was going: that Yuri had invited her because none of his family members could go even though they had tickets.

This claim had immediately aroused Johan's suspicions.

Yuri was exclusively interested in magic. He never wasted his time doing something that had nothing to do with the arcane. He even had his second-in-command acting as a secretary and doing his paperwork so he could better focus on his research. He simply wasn't the kind of person who would go to the theater just because his family had given him tickets.

Furthermore, Marquis Drewes wasn't the kind of man to act on his emotions; he was a logical fellow who was careful with every resource. He certainly wasn't the sort of person who would let premium box seat tickets for a popular play in the capital go to waste.

Nevertheless, the marquis had given the tickets to Yuri, who very likely would have let those tickets mold in a corner. Then Yuri, who ordinarily would not have gone to the theater, had invited Sei to join him. The intersection of two unlikely events made it difficult to believe that there was no ulterior motive.

Johan believed that ulterior motive was these rumors in themselves. *I suspect the marquis aims to have them wed.*

It was easy to imagine why Marquis Drewes had spread the rumors if one considered the situation they had brought about.

As the Saint, Sei was of a rank equal to that of the king, so the palace was being careful in its selection of her future spouse. They were behaving no differently than parents of a noble house selecting a spouse for their daughter. However, in Sei's case, they were prioritizing her personal feelings, so her closeness with a person contributed a great deal to the likelihood of their selection.

Naturally, if there were rumors that Yuri had grown intimate with Sei, his name would rise to the top of the list of potential matches. At present, Knight Commander Albert of the Knights of the Third Order claimed that spot for himself. Johan believed that Marquis Drewes was trying to manipulate the situation in his favor and steal Albert's natural advantage.

Although Yuri was adopted, he was part of the marquis's house and of good parentage. He was even the grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly—the foremost position in his field. He was furthermore close in age to Sei, so no one would be surprised to see him become the most favored candidate if he grew

closer with her.

But rumors are just that—rumors. And I doubt Sei feels that way about Yuri.

Johan believed that even if Yuri rose to the top of the list, Albert wouldn't be toppled. After all, Albert was the only person for whom Sei had romantic feelings. Sei never voiced them out loud, but it was obvious in her behavior toward Albert.

Besides, Johan had heard a rundown of the real events of that night at the theater from Sei herself. It might have looked like she and Yuri were having an intimate discussion, but nothing romantic had transpired, nor had there been any talk of engagement. People were just inventing entirely made-up nonsense and running their mouths.

Nevertheless, he worried what his friend might think when he heard the rumors.

Johan sighed as he finished the final document. "Sorry for the wait," he said to the attendant he had summoned.

"Did you need something, sir?"

Johan divided the documents based on their destination, then he instructed the attendant to deliver them where they needed to go.

"What about this one, sir?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll bring it myself."

The document by Johan's hand was to be submitted to the Knights of the Third Order. Ordinarily, he would have asked the servant to take it as well, but this time, he decided not to. He would deliver it himself so that he could check on Albert.

"Very well, sir."

Johan did occasionally transport important documents himself, so the servant accepted his decision without comment and left the room.

After the servant was gone, Johan picked up the document and stood.

“It’s Valdec, from the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. Is Sir Hawke in?” Johan asked the knight standing in front of the door to Albert’s office. He had come unannounced, so he wasn’t sure his friend was available.

“My apologies, but he has yet to return from the training grounds.”

The way the knight phrased that made it sound like Albert was overdue and that he would arrive very soon. “I see,” said Johan. “Would it be all right if I waited for him?”

“Indeed. In that case—oh, sir!”

Just then, Albert appeared. He was a little ways away, but Albert broke out in a grin when he recognized his friend. He raised a hand in greeting and seemed to be acting like his usual self.

I thought the rumors might have depressed him, but it seems I didn’t need to worry. Johan gave Albert a crooked smile as he raised a hand in turn. Perhaps he was being overprotective.

“What brings you here today?” Albert asked as he approached Johan, still smiling.

“There’s something I’d like to address personally.” Johan raised the document in his hand. Albert likely assumed that it was something important, just as the servant had.

“All right. Come in.” Albert welcomed Johan into his office and ordered everyone else to leave. “So, what is it you wish to discuss?”

“The veracity of the rumor I keep hearing.”

“Rumor?” Albert looked puzzled, unsure of what his friend was referring to.

“Yes.” Johan grinned. “The one about Sei and Lord Drewes. Do you want to know?”

Albert suddenly understood. His smile disappeared and he heaved a great sigh as he shot Johan a somewhat exasperated look—not because of the rumor itself but because of his friend. Johan often teased him about his relationship with Sei, and he was sure Johan had come to tease him yet again because of all this.

And here I came because I was worried about him, thought Johan. Although Albert's attitude was fairly unexpected, Johan knew he was getting a side eye because of how he usually behaved around his friend. Thus he didn't voice his inner thoughts and instead only responded with a wry smile. "Not that there's much to say, in the end."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Sei told me what happened. The gossip is blown out of proportion."

Counter to Johan's fears, Albert appeared unbothered by all this talk. It made Johan feel a bit foolish, having come here all worked up as he had, and he relaxed, the tension easing from his shoulders. Then he began to regale Albert with the tale Sei had relayed to him of her experience at the theater.

"In the end, they wound up completely ignoring the performance in favor of discussing the Light spell."

"I see. I'm surprised Sei talked that much about magic."

"Well, she *was* with Lord Drewes. She was probably focusing on the arcane as a matter of courtesy."

"Oh yes, that's quite possible."

Johan told Albert the whole story in order, from how Yuri had invited Sei to the play, to how they had accidentally become so fixated on their conversation, to how Sei had been depressed after she got home because she couldn't remotely remember the contents of the play.

Just as the rumors said, Sei and Yuri had talked a great deal. To an onlooker, they had probably looked like they were discussing something private. However, Johan clarified that no matter how you sliced it, the conversation had been that of two researchers.

Johan couldn't speak for Yuri, but at the very least he knew Sei had no feelings for the grand magus. He could tell as much from the expression she had worn while describing the experience.

After Johan finished, Albert, who had made out like he wasn't bothered, laughed quietly with something like relief. However, in the next instant, his

expression grew somewhat miffed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that it’s surprising that Sei went to the theater.”

“I was surprised as well. I assumed she didn’t care for such aristocratic venues.”

“Me too. If I had known she might be interested, I would have invited her.”

“What? You wanted to be the first to take her to a play?”

“Yes. You got a problem with that?” Albert remained unperturbed by the teasing and glared defiantly, which made Johan burst out laughing.

Once Johan recovered himself, his expression grew serious as he laid out his theory regarding the situation. “This was likely Marquis Drewes’s idea. The grand magus was no doubt only following orders.”

“I believe so as well. I’m sure the marquis is trying to remove all obstacles by spreading rumors about Grand Magus Drewes’s relationship with Sei in order to have him claim the title of her fiancé.”

“You thought so too?”

“I did. There’s been some talk of how he’s trying to take a stand against House Hawke by claiming not only the seat of grand magus but the Saint as well.”

“I see. That does sound like the sort of thing the marquis would do, considering his hunger for power.”

Johan and Albert were of the same mind. Marquis Drewes had ordered Yuri to invite Sei to the theater in order to further his ambition to declare Yuri her fiancé.

Albert’s older brother Josef, the Minister of Military Affairs, shared this theory about the marquis’s motives. Johan could easily imagine how Josef had come to this conclusion, given the way high society viewed the marquis.

In any case, since the subject of Sei’s engagement had been brought up, Johan decided this would be a good opportunity to voice something that had

been on his mind of late. “Say, I know I might be poking my nose into something I shouldn’t, but now might be the time for you to make your move.”

As the Saint, Sei held a very high position in the Kingdom of Salutania. She was also held in high regard by the domain lords for slaying their monsters and devising recipes that featured the specialties for which their regions were known. The skincare products sold by her company were exceedingly popular with not only the nobility but well-off commoners, and she was doing very well for herself as far as profits went. Furthermore, her herb research—her main occupation—had led to the concoction of a miraculous potion called a panacea that could heal any status abnormality. On top of all that, there was talk of how the royal family would award her land rights in the form of her own personal research institute.

Some of that was classified information, but the publicly available information alone had led a multitude of people to pursue some kind of relationship with Sei, and that number was only growing. There were many ways to establish a relationship with the Saint, but the best one would be to win her hand in marriage. Therefore, even though Sei could only marry individuals who ranked as high as a count or greater, many people had put their name forward to be considered a potential match for Sei.

Naturally, people from the inner marquisdoms—families of higher rank than Albert’s borderlands family—had also named themselves as potential matches, and they beat Albert’s claim by lineage and assets alone.

Yet Albert still stood above the rest because Sei’s feelings played a significant role in the crown’s decision. If anything, if her feelings were to change, Albert would immediately lose his superior position. Many sought just that sort of opportunity, and Johan feared someone might take them by surprise. This was why he was finally encouraging Albert to secure his place by her side.

Both Johan and Albert knew that Sei was a late bloomer when it came to romance. As such, Johan had merely watched over their relationship while poking fun at them as they slowly grew closer. However, Johan wasn’t the only one who felt that the time limit was fast approaching—Albert did as well.

“I suppose you might be right,” Albert agreed, his eyes cast down and a

humble look on his face.

That night, after Johan came to speak to him about Sei and Yuri, Albert found himself lost in thought in his quarters at the barracks. He was thinking about Sei. Albert didn't remember their first meeting, which had been after his expedition into Ghoshe Forest to the west of the capital.

He had gone on expeditions into Ghoshe many times before, and he assumed the sally that day would be like all the others. The forest spawned monsters of higher levels than the eastern and southern forests, but none of the beasts had ever been more than Albert could handle. He wasn't being careless, per se, but he lowered his guard. The thing that became his downfall appeared just as they were about to finish their expedition.

A salamander would ordinarily never have spawned in the Ghoshe Forest, and when it did, only a few out of over a hundred soldiers, including Albert, were able to react in time. The flames the salamander breathed were scorching hot, and those near to the fire were instantly burned.

The surrounding area was enveloped in heat and the flames closed in. Albert threw up a wall of ice, saving the people nearby. However, everyone far away from him was consumed by the blaze.

Salamanders were usually black lizards about ten feet long, but this one glowed red once it turned hostile and radiated immense heat. No one could get close due to the heat waves it emanated, so they had to rely on the fallback strategy of attacking it at range with magic. However, as the party had been nearing the end of their expedition, the mages and knights were low on MP, and they had few means of recovering, so slaying the salamander proved extremely difficult.

The salamander's flames consumed not only the knights but the forest. Some of the mages split away from the battle to focus on using Water Magic to prevent the fire from spreading.

Somehow, despite the serious burns he had sustained, Albert managed to pierce the salamander with a finishing blow—at which point he lost consciousness.

Where am I?

When Albert next awoke, he was in a chamber within the palace. He didn't recognize the upholstery, but he realized that he was no longer in danger, so he absentmindedly tried to recall what had happened. The last thing he remembered was finishing off the salamander. He had no idea what had happened after that.

He glanced at his right hand; the burns he had expected to see were completely gone. Someone had healed him.

My hand is completely whole... Is my face healed as well? Albert sat up in the bed and peered into the chamber's mirror. What should have been a face covered in burns looked entirely back to normal.

No ordinary potions, not even the high-grade variety, could have so cleanly healed his scars. Albert naturally concluded that one of the mages who could use Healing Magic had restored him. Whoever it was must have been exceptionally skilled.

Albert's injuries had been so grievous that he had assumed it would be difficult to remain at his post as a knight even if he could be healed. He had resigned himself to this fate at the time, but now he felt as hale and hearty as he had before the expedition. He had been restored to the point that he would be able to continue serving as a knight without any lasting problems.

The next day, Johan came to see how Albert was doing. "No, actually it wasn't Healing Magic. It was a potion."

Albert was beyond shocked. "Really?"

Johan shrugged and didn't deny it. "Really. I saw it with my own eyes."

Albert knew the institute bought high-grade potions from outside companies. He had drunk these alchemist-made potions before and knew their potency. Yet he felt like the high-grade potion he had consumed had been far more potent than those. If such effective potions existed, then he wanted to procure some

for his order.

“Who in the world did we get such potions from?” Albert murmured as these thoughts ran through his mind.

“Us,” Johan answered flatly.

“Us? You mean the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora?”

“Indeed. One of my researchers made it.”

According to Johan, a member of his institute was capable of brewing extremely potent potions.

“Is that so? One of yours... Listen, Johan...”

“Yeah?”

“Could I meet him? I’d like to express my gratitude.”

“That so? Sure,” Johan readily agreed.

From there, it appeared as if things would proceed smoothly.

They didn’t.

Albert took some time to recover from the expedition, and it wasn’t until about a month later that he finally managed to meet the person who had brewed the potion that saved his life.

The day he was to meet the potion’s maker, Albert and Johan waited in Albert’s office. The potion-maker hadn’t come with Johan because Albert wanted to not only thank the fellow but give him a gift as well, so they were meeting to discuss that in advance.

As a result, Albert had settled on offering not a physical gift but an agreement to escort the researcher into the forest to pick herbs. They had some time before the fellow would arrive, so while they waited, Albert tried to find out just what sort of person he was.

“So who is this man anyway?”

“What do you mean? A researcher is a researcher.”

“I know, I know. I’m asking what he looks like, what’s his personality. That sort of thing.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure that out soon enough.”

“I suppose.”

When Albert wouldn’t give up, Johan opted to pretend he’d just remembered something. “Oh, didn’t you receive some one-on-one attention with that potion? My employee was purportedly the one who made you drink it.”

“That so?” Albert had no problem with this. He nevertheless did have a problem with what Johan said next.

“Indeed. In an act of profound charity, you were fed mouth-to-mouth.”

“What?!” Albert raised his voice in surprise, still burdened by his misconceptions.

“You just don’t remember because you were unconscious at the time.”

Johan’s teasing tone and smirk finally made Albert realize that he had fallen for another one of Johan’s pranks. He shot his friend an exasperated glare just as they heard his subordinate announce that the researcher had arrived.

When the researcher entered the room, Albert stared in wonder. The person he had assumed was a man was actually a woman, but more than that, he was taken aback by the color of her hair and eyes.

Her hair was black, as were her eyes—an unusual combination in the Kingdom of Salutania. Albert could think of only one woman who worked at the institute: one of the potential Saints who had been summoned using the Saint Summoning Ritual.

She’s... But she’s so much different from what I’d heard.

Everything Albert had heard about the potential Saint said that she was gaunt and taken by illness. Furthermore, according to the gossip of the maids who had waited on her while she lived at the palace, she disliked dressing up in luxurious gowns, preferred plain clothes, and carried herself like a woman from a farming village. He had also heard from Johan that she was like the other researchers in that she appeared not to care much about her appearance.

However, while the woman before him was dressed simply, her appearance was tidy, and she didn't at all resemble the rumors about her. Though she had pale skin, it wasn't as sickly as the maids had claimed; she had a healthy complexion and there were no traces of dark circles under her eyes.

Sei had been living a much more comfortable life than she had in Japan, and her homemade skincare products had done their work. Her ivory-white skin and cherry blossom lips appeared fresh and youthful. Even her waist-length black hair had a lovely sheen.

Albert had heard that the Saint wasn't preoccupied with skincare like a typical noble lady, yet her natural beauty captivated him.

When he thought on the moment later, he suspected he had fallen in love on the spot.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." She must have been called here under the pretext that she was to deliver a document.

"It's quite all right. Thank you for bringing this."

"Well, I'll get back to the institute then." She handed over the document and made to leave right away, but Johan quickly stopped her.

"Wait."

Albert was taken by surprise for the umpteenth time that day.

He was the third son of the lord of the Hawke Borderlands. House Hawke had been a military family for generations and led the Kingdom of Salutania's army. On top of that, as they held the rank of borderlands lord, they had more practical power than the average marquis. Furthermore, his grandmother, the previous lady of the Hawke Borderlands, had been the older sister of a previous king. She had been so beautiful that they'd called her "the Frozen Rose." The three brothers of House Hawke had inherited her beauty and received a slew of marriage offers since they were very young.

Everyone in high society knew the tale of how Erhart, the second son, had begun to loathe women after seeing his older brother Josef swarmed by girls. Albert had likewise been on the receiving end of many amorous glances while he attended the Royal Academy. His aversion to women wasn't as bad as

Erhart's, but he preferred not to associate with them. Thus, Albert had adopted an expressionless look to keep the swarms at bay.

However, despite that impassive expression and the icy gazes from his frigid eyes, Albert continued to be an object of admiration for many women due to his good looks. Although he tried not to allow them to get close, some remained undiscouraged and continued to try to approach him. Once they managed to latch on, they were never easy to dislodge.

Therefore, because this had been Albert's experience with women thus far, he was shocked to see Sei immediately try to leave. What surprised him even more was that he wanted to stop her from going.

Albert and Sei introduced themselves to one another, and as she looked at him, he detected no hint of the zeal he was accustomed to seeing in the eyes of other women.

That was when Albert became aware of his own heart. He found he *wanted* Sei to look at him in the way those women did—the very same kind of gaze that he had until now shied away from.

Having become aware of those feelings, Albert was quick to change his behavior. He treated Sei kindly, inadvertently making it seem that this was the way he treated all other women and that he had never behaved in any other way.

Sei, who had no experience with love, was the perfect match for Albert, who was fed up with the advances of other women. He was sure that Sei would be angry if she learned this, but when she grew flustered at his teasing, he realized that she was beginning to feel the same for him. That made him happy.

It was an immature way to flirt, when one took their ages into account, but it was...cozy. Albert wanted to continue enjoying the time he spent with her.

However, Johan was right—if Albert didn't make his move soon, that cozy relationship would likely come to an end.

Fine. No more delays. It was finally time to act.

Act 5:

Confession

I RECEIVED A SUDDEN INVITATION to a tea party, which was unusual. It was just a tea party, but be that as it may, it was a *tea party*. If all I had to look forward to was enjoying tasty pastries, drinking tea, and chatting and giggling, the invitation would have arrived a week before the date of the event. This one had arrived only a day before.

Typically, I would have said no, but the hostess was someone I knew well: Liz. Of course I was happy to accept an invitation from her, even if it had arrived with such short notice.

I quickly penned a reply and inquired to make sure that the palace maids would be available to help me get ready.

It was the day of the party. After formally greeting each other, we took our seats. Just as I was taking my first sip of tea, Liz asked, “So, Sei. Is there something you might have neglected to mention?”

“What do you mean?”

Liz rarely did this. Usually, even during our convivial friends-only parties, we started with small talk. Today, she instantly jumped to what appeared to be the main reason she had put this together.

Was there something that important to discuss? I couldn’t imagine why else Liz, former fiancée of the prince, would ignore standard procedure in this manner.

I wondered what she might be getting at as I tried to answer her question. “Hmm. I can’t think of anything in particular.”

“Really? You haven’t the slightest idea as to what you might need to tell me? Or is this the sort of thing you can’t discuss?”

“While there are indeed some things I mustn’t discuss outside specific

contexts, I'm not exactly sure what you mean. Thus I don't know how to answer your question."

"So that's how it is. Very well, then, I shall ask you plainly: What is your relationship with Grand Magus Drewes?"

"Grand Magus Drewes?"

My mind filled with question marks. Why was Liz asking about Yuri? I supposed I'd just have to ask her after I explained. First, I needed to answer her question. As for our relationship, the only way I could think to correctly describe it was that of a teacher and his student. Oh, though we were also colleagues who went on monster-slaying expeditions together. As we were employed by different organizations, there was no simple way to capture our dynamic.

"Let me think... A mentor-mentee relationship, I guess? He teaches me about the arcane."

"Is that all?" Liz squinted at me accusingly.

"Uh, yes?"

Huh? What? Why is she looking at me like that? That's really the only way I can think to frame it.

As I was at a loss for how else to respond, Liz snapped her fan open to cover her mouth and breathed out a *very* obvious sigh. "Don't you know the rumors everyone in the palace is spreading about you two?"

"Huh? What rumors?" I hadn't heard about any *rumors*.

Nobles lived for the latest gossip. For a time, everyone had been talking about the Saint's powers of purification and the potency of my Healing Magic, but that had been quite a while ago and had since died down. I hadn't released any new skincare products either, so I doubted anyone was talking about those. Same thing with the food we had served at the food festival I hosted at the palace. Although those dishes were still a popular topic of discussion, I doubted *everyone* was talking about them.

So what rumors was Liz referring to?

Wait a minute. Do they have something to do with the grand magus? She did

say “grand magus,” right? And as for my relationship with him...

Just as I realized what was going on, Liz declared, “I hear that you’re now engaged to Lord Drewes.”

“What?!” I screeched in a most unladylike manner. Then, as I heard more details from Liz, I found myself deeply troubled.

According to her, all the nobles were gossiping about me and Yuri. Someone had started the rumors because they’d seen our behavior at the theater. They had witnessed our friendly conversation in the opera box and begun spinning wild speculations about the nature of our relationship. That original speculation had been even more hugely exaggerated, and now baseless rumors were circulating throughout the palace—the most groundless of these being that Yuri and I were now engaged.

Liz had been shocked when she heard these allegations, which was why she was inquiring as to their veracity. “Then it *is* true that you went to the theater with Lord Drewes?”

“Yes. He told me that his family had tickets that no one else could use.”

“That’s a typical way to invite a lady.”

“But this is *Lord Drewes* we’re talking about. He couldn’t give a fig about anything unmagical. I doubt he imagined these rumors would pick up.”

“That’s true. I understand how you feel. However, you were careless.”

“Uuugh...”

“And now you’re paying for your mistake. It was foolish of you to agree to go with a man to the theater alone. You were practically begging to become the target of gossip.”

“I’m sorry...” In the face of Liz’s exasperated expression, all I could do was apologize.

This lecture pertained to something I had actually learned in my classes at the palace. The fact that I had accepted Yuri’s invitation even though I knew better had been total carelessness on my part.

Liz was right that a man and woman going somewhere by themselves was

always cause for rumor—especially since we had been in box seats, in which you could claim we had been practically alone.

On top of that, it turned out that box seats were often how people flaunted intimacy when they went with someone other than their family or betrothed. Furthermore, the two persons of interest in this matter were the grand magus and the Saint. According to Liz, it was only a matter of course that everyone who'd spotted us and cared even a little about gossip had immediately told everyone they knew.

"I'm certain people will talk about it for a time, but it ought to die down before long," Liz said.

"You think so?"

"Yes. They'll move on to the next big rumor in no time. I suggest you learn your lesson from this and be wary of invitations from men in the future."

"Yeah. I'll be careful from now on."

I took Liz's generous advice to heart, after which our tea party came to a close.

Two days later, I was still dealing with the rumors.

I was crouched in the herb garden at the institute, staring at the ground as I mentally harangued myself. I didn't voice this out loud because I didn't want anyone to overhear and think I was losing my mind. Apparently I still had it in me to think logically about potential risks. However, I was full of regret over my own stupidity. Specifically, ever since I left Liz's tea party, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about certain...things.

According to Liz, everyone in the palace was whispering this rumor. That meant *a lot* of people knew it. That was embarrassing, sure, but if only people I didn't know had been talking about it, I wouldn't have cared so much. Even if people I did know were talking about it... Well, even if that was the case, I could probably get over it.

But my heart twisted whenever I thought about what would happen if a

certain guy heard these rumors. It made me unbearably anxious.

By “certain guy,” I meant the knight commander. I had only realized it recently, but I was pretty sure I was in love with Albert.

I was always happy to see him, and I became giddy when we conversed, even if it was just idle small talk. I had never felt that way about anyone else. That was why I was pretty sure that I was in love. On the other hand, I had never been in love in this world or the one I’d come from, so I wasn’t entirely sure.

Our current relationship was wonderful. But what would Albert think if he heard those rumors? If he heard them like Liz had and thought that Yuri and I were going to be engaged, would he start to distance himself from me?

The Kingdom of Salutania and Japan had similar social mores in that it was generally taboo to befriend someone of the opposite sex besides your betrothed. Albert was such an earnest and serious person, so I doubted he would break those rules. In short, the genial time we spent together would definitely come to an end. When I thought about that possibility, I could hardly contain myself.

It was no use crying over spilled milk, but that was exactly what I was doing. Why, oh why, had I said yes to Yuri’s invitation? The relationships between people were *always* a subject of gossip among the nobility as well as the commonfolk.

If I’d thought about it, I could have predicted that if two people went somewhere together, everyone would start to whisper that they were close—or even dating. Yet this hadn’t occurred to me at the time. I mean, in my defense, I’d never imagined that I might become the target of relationship-centric rumors.

Weren’t these kinds of rumors just supposed to be a junior high thing? Then again, I had never been the subject of gossip, even at that age... For one thing, as a girl who had never been popular with the guys, no one had ever spread rumors about me in the first place.

Ahh, but Liz was right. It really was stupid of me.

“What should I do?” I unconsciously murmured my thoughts out loud.

Excuses and guilt churned through my mind, leaving me in cognitive disarray.

Then someone called my name. “Sei?”

“Huh?” I yelped at the voice—especially since it belonged to the very person I was thinking about. I quickly rose and turned around to find Albert standing before me.

“Sir Hawke?” I was completely freaked out by his arrival and too stunned to remember to say hello.

Albert seemed unbothered by this, though. If anything, he was worried. “What’s the matter? You look like something’s bothering you.”

I couldn’t say it. There was absolutely *no way* I could say it. If I didn’t want this specific person to know about a rumor, how could I ask if he’d heard it?

Instead, I forced myself to smile to hide my anxiety. “Oh, uh, ummm—I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I mean, if you are, that’s all right, but if not...” Albert trailed off, still wearing a worried look. He seemed a touch despondent as he gazed at me.

Guilt prickled in my chest, but I didn’t have it in me to tell him what was troubling me. “What are you doing here today?”

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me the next time you have a day off.”

“Go out?”

“Yes. To a certain park in the capital.”

There were several parks in the capital, but one was particularly large, and it also functioned as a gathering place for the nobility. Even those who lived in mansions with vast gardens liked to take walks in that park and socialize with anyone they ran into. Some even liked to have picnics there during the warmer months.

Now Albert was asking me to go there with him.

“I know it’s not really the season for taking walks, but there’s something I’d

like to show you,” he said.

“There is? What?”

“You’ll have to come along with me to find out.” Albert smiled with his index finger raised. I could practically see his radiance.

I squinted a bit as I peered up at him. He was a feast for the eyes, just as usual.

But what could he want to show me? I really want to know. If I can’t find out unless I go, then I should do so. Anyway, an outing with Albert is sure to be fun.

Just as I was thinking of saying “yes,” I suddenly remembered Liz’s frustrated expression.

Oh... If I go out with Albert, will people just start more rumors about me?

When I thought of how cross she had been with me just two days prior, I reconsidered my response.

Although I wouldn’t mind if people were talking about me and Albert. He’s my h-heart’s desire after all—I think. So I don’t imagine I’d dislike there being rumors about us. I would find it embarrassing. What about Albert, though? I’d feel just awful if that kind of rumor would bother him. Maybe the right thing to do here would be to say no, especially after what happened with Yuri.

However, I was reluctant to turn Albert down. It had been a while since we’d last gone out together.

My desire to go and my sense that I shouldn’t warred with one another, and just as I slowly opened my mouth, Albert said in an uncharacteristically fainthearted tone, “Do you not want to?”

Albert’s shoulders drooped, and it felt like I could see animal ears on his head droop in disappointment as well. He looked at me with a plea in his eyes, and my voice died in my throat.

Ugh... How am I supposed to say no when you look at me like that?!

“I *do* want to.” I couldn’t deny him! I didn’t have it in me to turn him down when he used that face on me. Besides, part of me wanted to go. So I gave in—I said yes.

Albert's expression instantly brightened, which made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Oh well. I'll just leave the regret for later.

I forced myself to smile as well as we continued talking and planned out our future fun.

On the day of my outing with Albert, there wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

Although we were going to a park, it was a place where nobles went to socialize, so I was all kitted out in a gown. Nevertheless, it was an outdoor d-date (ahem), so I'd had the maids who helped me dress pick something that wasn't too gaudy and was easy to move in. For some reason, we were going out in the evening, so as it would likely be cold, I was also wearing a fur-lined coat at their suggestion.

Albert was on point with his wardrobe too. The carriage that came to the front gate of the institute at the scheduled time wasn't conspicuous, but it was of nice enough quality that you could tell at a glance that it belonged to a noble. As Albert stepped out of the carriage, he was wearing a different sort of outfit than he had the last time we went into the capital. It was brilliantly - embroidered, and it made his status self-evident.

Albert was already attractive, so I figured he would look good in anything, but he looked even more handsome than I had anticipated. He felt fifty percent more dazzling than usual when he dressed up like this. I could bear to observe him from afar, but I got too shy up close and couldn't look him in the eye. As Albert helped me into the carriage, I pretended to watch my feet to avoid his gaze and recover my self-control.

The park was near the center of the capital. As would be expected from a place where people went to socialize, it was bordered by countless other carriages that had brought their noble masters to the park. When I descended from the carriage and glanced around, I saw other visitors who looked like nobles too. However, the time being what it was, most were on their way out of

the park—unlike us.

“Shall we go?” Albert asked.

“Let’s.”

Albert escorted me onto the green.

As one might expect from a place the nobility used for walks, the paths were well maintained. They were flat with no grass and lined with neatly pruned shrubs. There were also trees planted at regular intervals along the paths, as well as grass used to accent them both. Even though the season was cold, there were flower beds of multicolored flowers.

Albert and I remarked on the scenery, which I was enjoying since it was so different from the palace gardens. It wasn’t spring or summer, when flowers would have been at their peak, but this garden was lovely even in winter.

Thus we continued making our way through the park until I spotted a black iron fence. There was something that looked like a gate with a guard standing near it. Was that the far edge of the park? However, that didn’t seem to be the case, as there appeared to be a dense forest on the other side.

As I wondered about this, Albert led me to the guard. “I’m Albert Hawke.”

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival.” The guard opened the gate for us. He smiled and gave a slight bow as Albert escorted me past the gate.

“Do they need that gate to keep the public from something beyond it?” I asked.

“Indeed. Only members of the royal family are allowed to walk through this area.”

“What?! Really?”

“I managed to secure permission for you.”

“For me?!”

I was stunned to hear that this fenced-off area was for the royal family’s exclusive use. I assumed they used it for parties they personally hosted or something. The palace had its own gardens, but this place had a unique charm,

so it seemed lovely in its own right.

How to describe what I was feeling? It was a vague impression that part of me couldn't accept what was happening, even as I knew something important was about to unfold.

What did he mean, he secured permission for me? Did he ask the king to take me on this date? Can you ask to use a place like this for something as minor as a date? I was overflowing with all kinds of doubts as we came to a clearing in the forest.

The spectacle that revealed itself robbed me of all thought.

"Oh my!"

The marvel before us was so enchanting that it made me cry out. I wasn't sure how to describe it. It was like taking in a landscape carved entirely of ice.

The grove was coated in translucent frozen layers, and the trees sparkled as they were bathed in the light of the setting sun. No, wait—it wasn't just the sun. When I looked closer, I realized that some of the branches were accented with glowing points as well.

Are those enchanted foci?! Huh? But why is something like that on the trees?! I was stunned to see the same kind of light I had just seen at the theater now illuminating the trees here and there. What is this place?

As I stared in wonder, Albert explained, "I tried to recreate something you once told me about. How did I do?"

"You mean Christmas lights?"

"Exactly."

Albert's words and the wonder before me made memories bubble to the surface. At some point in the past, when I had been telling Albert about the world of my origin, I had mentioned Christmas lights. So that was what these were supposed to be? That made sense. I had also told him that we used those lights to decorate every year during the cold winter months.

"You remembered?" I asked.

"Yes. I thought they must look something like this. Was I right?"

“Yes. They’re *exactly* like this.”

“I’m glad to hear that. As they were something you used to see every year, I thought you might like to see them here as well. That’s why I did this for you.”

“Really? Thank you. It’s so beautiful.”

Albert had gone to all this trouble? He’d *made* this frozen grove? That was in his wheelhouse, as a master of Ice Magic. I was sure he could enchant foci as well. I greedily drank it all in so that I would never forget the sight. He must have put a great deal of effort into making this scene.

I turned to thank Albert again, but for some reason he took my right hand. What was he up to now? I looked up at him to ask, at which point I saw that he was gazing down at me with a serious expression.

Albert wrapped both hands around mine. “Sei...I love you. Will you marry me?”

His declaration made me choke.

“M-marry me”? *No, wait, back up. He loves me? Huh? He loves me?*

It was a strange experience, oh-so-conveniently hearing something I had so hoped to hear. It made me doubt my ears. I stared at Albert for confirmation, but he still wore the same nervous yet serious look. I couldn’t detect a hint of teasing in his eyes.

Did he really just ask me to marry him? I continued to stare at him, still disbelieving.

Albert didn’t move as he went on, “To be honest, I wanted to take things much slower.”

“O-oh?”

“Yes. You didn’t seem accustomed to traditional courtship.”

Albert’s words brought all kinds of things to mind, and a slight heat rose in my cheeks.

Well, you’re right about that. Now that I think back on it, the way he kissed me on the back of my hand or brought his hand to my cheek—all of those things

I took as teasing—was that actually his way of testing my comfort with the situation? I thought dumbly.

Then Albert's expression grew clouded. "But I can't hold back anymore. Too many people have been seeking your hand in marriage."

"Do you mean—"

"I couldn't keep my calm when I heard about you and Grand Magus Drewes."

"Oh..."

"I don't want to lose you to anyone else."

I was shocked to hear Albert bring up the grand magus. *He knew*. However, it turned out that I'd never had any reason to worry. The rumor had merely inflamed Albert's competitive spirit. As such, I was imprudently relieved.

"Of course, I have no intention of ignoring your feelings. But if you wish to do so, would you accept my hand in marriage? I will cherish you for the rest of my days."

As I gazed into Albert's earnest eyes, something started to well up from my feet.

I was *happy*. So, so deliriously happy. I wanted to say yes immediately. But I lacked the confidence, so I just stared up at him.

"Are you sure you want someone like me?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"Yes," Albert replied, his voice full of reassurance.

Perhaps it was because of my joy, but my vision began to blur with tears. My throat quivered, and I couldn't speak. Instead of words, I took Albert's hand in mine, thereby accepting his proposal.

Albert broke out into an enormous smile, and he drew me into his arms for a tight embrace. I wrapped my arms around him as well, embracing him in turn.



The days after Albert's proposal passed in a flurry. Normally, his family would have been the first people we told. Marriage between nobles was a contract between houses in the Kingdom of Salutania, so we required their permission to move forward. In particular, we needed the approval of Albert's father, the head of the family. However, Albert said that was unnecessary. They had known about his feelings for me for a long time now, and they had even been encouraging him to hurry up and propose. As such, he didn't need to seek their permission.

I see. So when we visited, they were welcoming me into their family. That brought me some peace of mind. But if we're getting married, then we'll surely have to see them again soon.

Albert was in favor of celebrating with his family. However, both of his brothers held important offices in the kingdom. His parents were awfully busy as well, so it would be difficult to find a day when everyone could come together.

As such, we decided to inform them all by letter. Albert said that if we waited, with his brothers' assistance, we would sort out a day when everyone would be available.

Thus, the very first person we told was my boss, the head researcher at the institute, who also happened to be Albert's childhood friend.

When we showed up at Johan's office together, he raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "What are you two doing here?"

"I'm sorry to bother you while you're in the middle of work," I said. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course."

"Uhhh, so..." Now that it was the moment to tell him, I grew shy and hesitated.

"We're getting married," Albert announced without pause.

We had assumed Johan would instantly begin to tease us, so Albert and I had agreed to just say it to him straight out—and to show up without prior notice so he wouldn't have a chance to study us and figure it out himself.

However, our fears proved groundless.

“Finally did it, eh? Congratulations.” A relieved smile crossed Johan’s face as he offered us a totally ordinary congratulations. After that, however, he smirked at Albert.

“Thanks,” Albert said with a tight smile. Although Johan hadn’t said anything, he knew what he meant.

“Thank you,” I echoed.

With our first mission complete, we were released before Johan could try to pry.

The next two people we told were the king and the prime minister.

As I was the Saint and therefore of equal status with the king, they would treat my wedding as they would the marriage of a member of the royal family. That was why our meeting wouldn’t end with a simple announcement of our engagement; we would have to tend to all kinds of formalities. It was therefore necessary to alert them as soon as possible.

We were soon granted an audience, and by the time Albert and I reached the king’s office, the prime minister was already present. The knights who acted as guards and other officials who helped with various duties were also there.

I had told the king and prime minister that Albert would be accompanying me, so they must have anticipated our announcement. They all wore unusually bright smiles as we entered.

I felt a bit embarrassed by all this. My face was a bit flushed, but I managed to make myself smile too.

After our formal greetings, the king asked us to sit on one of the couches. The king stood from his desk to sit in the opposite couch, so we thanked him and took the neighboring seats he’d directed us to. The prime minister stood beside the king’s seat, as per usual.

“So, I believe you have an announcement to make,” said the king, jumping straight to the main subject we’d come to discuss.

I had prepared my response in advance. “So we do. We have come to inform

you of our betrothal.”

At first, I had considered giving the king all kinds of explanations for my choice, but even imagining how I would convey all that made my face hot, so I didn’t think myself capable of offering a proper rundown. Therefore, I had decided to offer the king the minimum necessary amount of information. Even that made my face warm.

“Your fiancé is Knight Commander Hawke?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations,” the prime minister agreed.

Neither of them looked particularly surprised as they smoothly gave us their congratulations.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thank you,” Albert echoed.

Then, just as I had predicted, we dove into discussion of all kinds of proceedings and other events that would have to take place. There were a multitude of things we would have to do.

The sequence of getting engaged before getting married was the same as in the world I came from, with the exception that the engagement was a necessary first step in the kingdom. Since this was a contract between houses, I would need to speak with Albert’s father to enter into the contract. Fortunately for me, the king would lead the discussions since he acted as my guardian in such affairs.

According to the prime minister, the major topic of discussion would be assets. As the royal family were acting as my guardians, they would provide my dowry as well.

In my opinion, them serving as my guardians was sufficient favor in itself, and I initially declined additional assistance, but the king wouldn’t accept my refusal. He claimed that because I had achieved so much for Salutania, there had been a delay in providing a proper reward, so he was going to use this

opportunity to fulfill that obligation.

That being the case, I had no option but to accept, especially as I had been in the habit of declining everything he offered me. Besides, the dowry was likely to be money rather than rank or land.

After all of the conditions were agreed upon and Albert and I were formally engaged, the next thing to do was to hold a reception. It wasn't the kind held after a wedding but rather a party to announce our betrothal.

This was common practice for the nobility of Salutania. As part of House Hawke, we were obligated to follow suit. That ran doubly true with regard to my position as the Saint. If we didn't host a party, the other houses would turn their noses up at House Hawke, and I definitely didn't want that to happen. I therefore couldn't refuse—especially not after the prime minister came up with a wonderful suggestion for the reception.

The plague of the black swamps had finally been taken care of, so the palace had been planning to hold a victory banquet. The prime minister suggested that we use the event for our announcement.

It would be a huge help to piggyback on something they had already been planning, and neither the king nor Albert had any objections, so I gratefully accepted the prime minister's proposal.

And so, having sorted out our betrothal reception, things were moving along smoothly. However...

No one anticipated that we would receive such news from far away after the reception-slash-victory banquet.

The Saint's
Magic Power is
Omnipotent

Short Story
COLLECTION

Things Associated with Summer 1

ONE AFTERNOON, I had neither lessons nor urgent work to attend to, so I headed to the Royal Magi Assembly's training grounds to practice.

"It's summer now, right?" I asked Aira between drills. We'd happened to meet each other there.

Aira gave me a wry smile. "I believe so, yes."

"But it doesn't look like it at all."

The training grounds had no roof, and the bright sun shone upon them. The sun was bright, which just made it all the more clear that it was indeed the middle of the hottest season. However, I didn't get the impression that it was *actually* summer—because all the mages were wearing the same kind of robes they always wore.

According to Aira, their robes were actually made of a light material appropriate for the weather. However, they reached all the way to their ankles and looked like they had to be excessively hot—more the kind of thing you'd wear in spring or fall. Despite their clothes, Aira and the other mages focused on their drills with a nonchalant air.

The reason for this was simple. All of them possessed an object that had been enchanted. I habitually used a similar thing myself—the necklace I wore. Whenever I put it on, I could coolly withstand even the heat of high summer, so I never parted with it.

Perhaps it only seems hot, but it isn't actually that bad today? I wondered as I took off the necklace. I was immediately assaulted by the heat. It was less humid than Japan, but I would surely break out in a sweat soon if I let the sun keep beating down on me.

"Did it feel that bad?" Aira asked.

"Yup. It really is summer."

Maybe everybody's outfits had fooled me, but the body didn't lie—it was

summer, all right. Aira giggled as I silently put the necklace back on.

“Wearing enchanted items really does eliminate the sense of the seasons, doesn’t it?” Aira said. “Along with the outfits, I mean.”

“Mm-hmm. And there’s hardly anything here that’s *associated* with summer.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like how just about the only thing we have in this world are watermelons. There aren’t any summer festivals or fireworks or anyone walking around wearing yukata.”

My examples made Aira remember with a gasp. “Oh! Yeah, you’re right.”

Most of the things we associated with summer in Japan just didn’t exist in this world. Because of that, it was even harder to feel that it was truly the hottest season of the year.

“Hello, Lady Sei.” I turned to the person who suddenly greeted me and found myself facing the grand magus.

Is he here for training as well? I wondered. “Hello.”

Yuri hadn’t heard the particulars of our conversation, but he had caught an unfamiliar word, so he was curious to learn more. He dispensed with the greetings right then and there and immediately asked, “What were you two just talking about?”

I gave a brief explanation of seasonal associations from our original world.

Yuri nodded his head in understanding. “As it turns out, we do actually have fireworks in this world.”

“You do?” I had assumed they just didn’t exist, as I had never once seen them since my summoning.

“Indeed. We use them to send signals to people who are far away,” Yuri explained. He walked a little bit away to cast a spell. When he raised his palm into the air, a ball of fire burst forth from it and shot into the sky. Once it reached a certain height, it exploded.

It was a genuine firework.

“Something like this?” Yuri asked.

“Yes! Like that! Exactly like that!!” I couldn’t help getting excited. It had been so long since I had last seen one.

Aira was just as worked up and let out a shout of joy. The firework had been hard to see because it was still bright out, and it had been only the one color, but it had indeed been a firework.

“That was incredible! Thank you!”

Aira and I welcomed Yuri back with applause.

“No need to thank me.”

“If you wouldn’t mind doing that again, I would love to see it at night,” I said.

“Why at night?”

“Back in our world, fireworks were something you watched at night. That way you could see them clearly. They came in all kinds of colors and were wonderfully pretty.”

“Ah, I see. Then let’s try this again some night in the future. I’ll practice casting ones with more color.”

“Thank you!”

Thus Yuri went to practice recreating the kinds of fireworks we had enjoyed back in Japan. He was so willing to do anything when it was related to magic. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from him.

Yuri didn’t say when the next time would be, though. However, I had confidence that it wouldn’t take him long to figure these fireworks out. My heart beat with anticipation as I dreamed of seeing them once more.

Things Associated with Summer 2

IT ALL STARTED with that conversation about seasonal associations.

I mentioned my recent discussion with Aira while I was chatting with Johan, and the next thing I knew, we were holding a summer festival at the institute.

It was probably more accurate to say that it was a one-night-only beer garden rather than an actual festival. We wouldn't have fireworks or a bon dance; it sounded like it would just be a night of drinking and food.

At the very least, it had been decided that we were going to have a big event at the institute. The participants would be the researchers and other staff. Some of the chefs working in our kitchen would be able to join as well, so they were going to go all out with the food they intended to serve.

According to one person, there was a rumor that there had been a cutthroat competition between the chefs for the right to join. One researcher had spurred them on to come up with new dishes for the festival.

Just which institute was that researcher from, anyway? They weren't one of ours. They must have heard about the new foods being served, or somehow it had gotten out that our institute was doing something fun.

As the day of the festival approached, people from other organizations at the palace started to ask if they could join as well. The majority were rejected thanks to Johan's impregnable defenses, but I invited some of them myself.

The first on that list was as follows:

"Good evening, Sei. Thank you for the invitation."

"Good evening, Sir Hawke. Thank you so much for coming."

The time was already quite late, but it was still light outside because the days had grown long. However, it was considerably dimmer than it had been in the afternoon. Against the shadows, Albert's smile was so radiant that he practically had a halo. Always dishing out those absolute hunk vibes.

“I’ve been looking forward to today ever since I heard we would be trying new foods.”

“Me too. It should be food that goes well with the alcohol, so I hope you’ll enjoy yourself.”

Johan noticed his friend’s arrival and walked over. “Oh, Al, you’re here already?”

“That I am.”

It was just about time for the festival to begin, but we still had a few things left to do. I was reluctant to do so, but I left Albert with Johan and went back to my preparations. As I was handing out cups of alcohol to everyone, Johan announced that the festival could now start.

“Cheers!” the gathered cried.

I clinked glasses with the researchers nearby and drank my cup. Mine was filled with mead, so a sublimely gentle sweetness filled my mouth. It was a taste that went down easily, so as we were outdoors, I had to be careful not to drink too much.

“Sei.”

“Oh, Sir Hawke.”

Albert spoke to me just as I finished eating. Had he been looking for me? I felt a bit tipsy, so I couldn’t help wishing it were true.

Albert sat next to me, and we started talking about all kinds of things. In particular, we talked about what else I associated with summer.

“So in your country, you have festivals like this one?” he asked.

“Not quite. This is about as lively as a festival, but it’s more like a beer garden.”

“A beer garden?”

“Yeah. That’s a tavern where you drink alcohol and eat outdoors.”

“I see.”

“Although I suppose beer gardens are associated with summer too.” I smiled

as I absentmindedly gazed about at all the happy people.

I'd once gone to a beer garden a long time ago, and the atmosphere had felt just like this.

"Sei," Albert ventured.

I looked up at him. "Yes?"

He wore a somewhat shy expression and seemed hesitant to say something. He sank into silence before finally asking, "Does this remind you of old times?"

I wondered if he had meant to ask me something else. How would I have answered if, instead, he had asked me if I wanted to return to my old world?

"Yeah." I smiled, looking up at him as I spoke the answer in my heart.

A quiet air settled between us, but upon seeing my smile, Albert's lips curled up as well.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Yuka Tachibana.

Thank you so much for buying *The Saint's Magic Power is Omnipotent*, Volume 8.

Thanks to you, I somehow managed to produce an eighth volume. I am so grateful for the support everyone's always giving me. Thank you. Usually things get pretty hectic, but I think it all went much smoother than last time, thanks to my editor. It was probably as hectic as it was with Volume 6? Nevertheless, I'm really glad I somehow managed to deliver this book to you all.

Thank you so much to Editor W at KADOKAWA BOOKS for going above and beyond with this volume. It's because of you that we were somehow—somehow!—able to publish it. You were such a lifesaver for helping me work through things when I needed assistance. Thank you. And as always, thank you as well to everyone else involved.

So, did you enjoy Volume 8? I'm going to mention some things that are spoilers, so please be sure to read the story before continuing any further.

The world has remained unchanged, so I spent a lot of last year at home. However, because of that, I've been ordering food more often. The dried sausages that appeared in this book were one of those things. I ordered them from France, and they're called saucisson sec. In the story, Sei got excited and called them salami, but the saucisson sec I based them on are a bit different from salami. They're basically made with the same process, but the ratio of ground red meat to fat differs. My opinion after having actually eaten them is that saucisson sec is less heavy.

By the way, I ordered four different types of saucisson sec: smoked, herb, hazelnut, and cheese. The herb variety is like Sei's idea in the story, where the herbs coat the casing. That herb variety was my personal favorite. The runner-up was cheese. The texture of that one was closer to salami, probably because of the fat content of the cheese. There are all kinds of websites that sell

saucisson sec, so I encourage you to order some and give it a try yourselves if you're curious.

While writing this volume, I wound up getting all kinds of help from people. I did my research by interviewing people who are subject matter experts, and I was amazed by how quickly I was able to learn what I needed.

One of my relatives works for a meat-processing company. I asked them all kinds of question about dried sausages, one of which was, "If you were to replace the additives used in modern packaging with the kind used in medieval Europe, what would you use?" They were instantly able to give me an answer as well as a detailed explanation. It goes without saying that I was shocked. If I had tried to find an answer on my own, I just know it would've taken me much longer to figure anything out.

Another person who helped me was Miira Tori from the University of Tokyo's Mystery/Sci-Fi Research Society's New Moon Tea Party. They researched all kinds of things about European history for me. They even looked up a wide range of things that I couldn't research for myself and summarized it in an easy-to-read document. That was a huge help. They wrote about things I wanted to know along with things I hadn't anticipated needing to know, which really inspired me to write more. Thank you so much.

Yasuyuki Syuri-sensei did the illustrations for Volume 8 as well. Thank you so much yet again for the wonderful pictures. I love them all, but especially the one of Sei on the first page. She looks so *cute*. So very cute... The way her mouth is all puffed is just adorable. I've loved it since I saw the first rough sketch. Same for the final colored version. I had imagined the new character Zara would be a super sexy lady, but the design Yasuyuki-sensei came up with was incredibly charming. Thank you so much for your excellent work on this volume as well. I'm thinking of going to Yasuyuki-sensei's home to worship her with all my gratitude.

Volume 8 also has a regular edition and a special edition!

The special edition of Volume 8 comes with a full-color, thirty-two page booklet containing Yasuyuki-sensei's illustrations, an original notepad, and photo frames that look like they're from a social media site. Honestly speaking,

the booklet is absolutely amazing. It's packed with lovely illustrations that are worth keeping on hand even just as a compilation, but the brand-new illustrations are to die for. They were like a pile of gems—as soon as I saw the sketches, my mind went wild. It's really unfortunate that I lack the vocabulary with which to properly describe how they made me feel. Personally, I would like to visit the place that I used as a model for Hawke's Domain to make full use of the photo frames so I could take pictures of the two of them on dates for the main story. I hope those who bought the special edition will make use of the frames when you go out too. The notepad will probably go to waste on me though, since I can't use it (lol).

The manga version is doing well too. I'm so glad that so many people enjoy reading it. I'm very grateful to not only those who support the manga but everyone involved with it, starting with Fujiazuki-sensei. Thank you always. Volume 7 came out last December, so I wonder if anyone has read it yet. This volume was packed with all kinds of good stuff, but there was one part that was particularly memorable. The day before I received the manuscript with the Pomeranian scene, I had seen a tweet with a background full of Pomeranians. The timing was just so incredible that I burst out laughing the second I read that bit. I tip my hat to Fuji-sensei for having the sense to add in the latest trends (?). I'd expect nothing less.

With this volume, they also changed a part in the novel that was difficult to understand so it would be easier to follow. Specifically, they changed the bit about the man who appeared in the Great Alchemist's diary. In the novel, Sei wonders if the Great Alchemist is talking about her little brother, but it would be more accurate to say that the novel describes them as being such close childhood friends that they were *like* brother and sister. This is something I came up with in my head, but because it wasn't too obvious, many people assumed he was her actual little brother. That's why I had them change it. Thank you so much to Fuji-sensei and everyone involved with the manga for doing that for me.

Thanks to everyone's support, Volume 2 of the spin-off manga, *The Saint's Magic Power is Omnipotent: The Other Saint*, came out last December. I'm very happy that so many people are reading this title as well. Just like with the

manga version of the main story, I'm incredibly grateful to everyone involved with this spin-off, starting with Aoagu-sensei. Thank you, thank you. In Volume 2, Aira finally graduates from the Royal Academy and joins the ranks of the Royal Magi Assembly. I'm also looking forward to getting to read the stories that take place in the Royal Magi Assembly, which we only get a peek of in the main story. Aoagu-sensei draws such animated expressions on the characters' faces, so I always end up squee-ing whenever I see Aira's smiling face while reviewing the manuscript. I just love her cheerful smile with flower petals fluttering in the background.

Both the manga and the spin-off manga are currently on sale with great reviews. You can read them on Web comic publishing sites ComicWalker, pixiv Comic, Nico Nico Seiga, and others.* Some of the chapters are available to read for free, so please check them out if you're interested.

So, the anime was aired without a hitch last year. Those who watched it, did you enjoy it? I'll be super happy if you did. I loved watching it every week. I appreciate the production team so much; it came out wonderfully thanks to their hard work. All things considered, I thought that the novels were light on the romance when I was writing them, but it's a whole lot more concentrated when turned into an anime, isn't it? I squee-ed practically every episode.

As it turns out, since so many people watched the anime, it's been decided that there'll be a second season! But, like, when I was first told, at first I didn't understand what I was hearing. There was a second where I thought I was dreaming. In fact, my emotions rewound, and I just stood there with a smile on my face listening in a detached way. I'm sorry that this is the kind of author I am. Your support is the reason there's going to be a second season for silly old me. Thank you so much.

More detailed information about when the next season will air and such will be posted on the anime's official website and Twitter account. Please be sure to check them out if you're interested. Whenever official information is released, I always aim to post it on *Let's Be Novelists* and Twitter.

We've reached the end, so thank you so much for reading thus far. They're making strides against the pandemic. There's still no end to these disquieting days, but I hope you take care of yourselves. I'm going to work hard while trying

not to get sick so that I can make sure to deliver Volume 9 to you. I hope we'll meet again soon.

**Look for them in English, also from Seven Seas!*

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

First Appearances

Things Associated with Summer 1 – Special Favor for Volume 6 at Toranoana

Things Associated with Summer 2 – Special Favor for Volume 6 at Gamers

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